



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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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 European Capitals of Culture: figures, strategies and trends

Thomas Bisiani, Sonia Prestamburgo, Adriano Venudo

Introduction. A first impression

The European Capitals of Culture Program stands out as a long-standing and significant initiative in the landscape of European integration. Since its inception in 1985 with Athens, the title has been awarded to 79 cities up to 2025. This initiative has involved a total of 36 different countries, including not only the member states of the European Union, but also candidate countries for future accession, such as Serbia, and states belonging to the European Economic Area, such as Norway and Iceland.

The designation model has undergone significant evolution over time. In the early fifteen years, from 1985 to 1999, the practice generally involved awarding the title to a single city per year. The average in the period 1985-1999 was indeed one city per year, for a total of 16 capitals in fifteen years, with an annual average of 1,07 cities. Even in this early phase, however, there were occasional exceptions with 2 cities, as in 1990 with Glasgow and West Berlin.

Starting in 2000, the millennium year, a substantial change occurred: as many as 9 cities were designated simultaneously (Avignon, Bergen, Bologna, Brussels, Krakow, Helsinki, Prague, Reykjavik and Santiago de Compostela), setting a record that remains unbeaten. This event symbolically represented the unity and cultural plurality of Europe. Since then, the practice has stabilized with the designation of 2 or, in rare exceptions, 3 cities each year. The average from 2000 to 2024 has risen to 2,3 cities per year, arriving at a total of 63 capitals designated in the period 2000-2025, with an average of 2,42 cities per year. The year 2020 saw 3 cities (Rijeka, Galway, plus Novi Sad postponed). The year 2025 sees 2 (Chemnitz, Nova Gorica/Gorizia).

The increase in the number of designated cities is accompanied by a considerable expansion in the number of candidates. In recent calls for proposals, in countries such as Italy, Germany or Poland, there are frequently between 10 and 20 candidate cities for each selection round. This growing com-

petition reflects the strategic importance attributed to the title, which is capable of positively influencing cultural tourism, urban identity and infrastructural investments.

At the geographical level, there has been a shift from a majority of Capitals located in Mediterranean and Northwestern Europe in the first two decades, to a more balanced distribution. Today, over 40% of the cities selected from 2000 onwards are located in the countries of Central-Eastern and Southern Europe, helping to build a more inclusive European image that is representative of its precious heterogeneity.

The Program, born as a cultural celebration, has been transformed into an initiative capable of attracting millions of visitors, generating thousands of events and leaving a permanent legacy in many cities, consisting of infrastructure, networks and skills.

The Capitals. A year-by-year analysis

The temporal evolution of the European Capitals of Culture Program reflects the history of European cultural integration, designating cities that represent the richness and diversity of the continent.

As mentioned, in the 1980s and 1990s the practice generally involved the nomination of a single capital per year. Athens inaugurated the initiative in 1985, followed by symbolic cities such as Florence in 1986, Amsterdam in 1987, West Berlin in 1988 and Paris in 1989. In total, between 1985 and 1999, 16 cities were designated with an average of 1,07 cities per year. Other cities of the 1990s include Dublin (1991), Madrid (1992), Antwerp (1993), Lisbon (1994), Luxembourg (1995), Copenhagen (1996), Thessaloniki (1997), Stockholm (1998) and Weimar (1999).

From 2001 onwards, the program has stabilized with an average of 2 cities designated annually, often following a principle of geographical balance between Western and Central/Eastern Europe, especially after the enlargement of the EU in 2004. Some years have seen the designation of 3 cities, as in 2020 with Rijeka (Croatia), Galway (Ireland) and Novi Sad (Serbia), the latter postponed due to the pandemic.

Between 2000 and 2025, 63 capitals have been designated, with an average of 2,42 cities per year. The 2000s saw ci-

ties like Rotterdam and Porto (2001), Bruges and Salamanca (2002), Graz (2003), Genoa and Lille (2004), Cork (2005), Patras (2006), Sibiu and Luxembourg (2007), Liverpool and Stavanger (2008), Linz and Vilnius (2009). These were followed by: Essen/Ruhrgebiet, Istanbul and Pécs (2010), Turku and Tallinn (2011), Guimarães and Maribor (2012), Marseille and Košice (2013), Umeå and Riga (2014), Mons and Plzeň (2015), San Sebastián and Wrocław (2016), Aarhus and Paphos (2017), Leeuwarden and Valletta (2018), Matera and Plovdiv (2019). The 2020s, in addition to those of 2020, have included Eleusis, Novi Sad and Timișoara (originally designated for 2021/2022, postponed due to COVID), Kaunas, Esch-sur-Alzette and Novi Sad (2022), Veszprém, Eleusis and Timișoara (2023), Bad Ischl, Tartu and Bodø (2024). For 2025, Chemnitz and Nova Gorica/Gorizia have been designated.

There is a noticeable increase in the variety of cities chosen: initially large metropolises (Paris, Madrid, Berlin), the program has over time also recognized medium and small-sized centers such as Sibiu, Plzeň, Mons or Matera. The year-by-year progression shows the evolution of the initiative from a symbolic event to a permanent cultural infrastructure, capable of adapting to political changes (Eastern enlargement), social changes (enhancement of local identities) and health crises (pandemic).

Chronological assignment

1980s

1985 - Athens (Greece);
 1986 - Florence (Italy);
 1987 - Amsterdam (Netherlands);
 1988 - West Berlin (Germany);
 1989 - Paris (France).

1990s

1990 - Glasgow (United Kingdom);
 1991 - Dublin (Ireland);
 1992 - Madrid (Spain);
 1993 - Antwerp (Belgium);

1994 - Lisbon (Portugal);
 1995 - Luxembourg (Luxembourg);
 1996 - Copenhagen (Denmark);
 1997 - Thessaloniki (Greece);
 1998 - Stockholm (Sweden);
 1999 - Weimar (Germany).

2000s

2000 - Avignon (France), Bergen (Norway), Bologna (Italy), Brussels (Belgium), Krakow (Poland), Helsinki (Finland), Prague (Czech Republic), Reykjavík (Iceland), Santiago de Compostela (Spain);
 2001 - Rotterdam (Netherlands), Porto (Portugal);
 2002 - Bruges (Belgium), Salamanca (Spain);
 2003 - Graz (Austria);
 2004 - Genoa (Italy), Lille (France);
 2005 - Cork (Ireland);
 2006 - Patras (Greece);
 2007 - Sibiu (Romania), Luxembourg (Luxembourg);
 2008 - Liverpool (United Kingdom), Stavanger (Norway);
 2009 - Linz (Austria), Vilnius (Lithuania).

2010s

2010 - Essen (Germany, Ruhrgebiet), Istanbul (Turkey), Pécs (Hungary);
 2011 - Turku (Finland), Tallinn (Estonia);
 2012 - Guimarães (Portugal), Maribor (Slovenia);
 2013 - Marseille (France), Košice (Slovakia);
 2014 - Umeå (Sweden), Riga (Latvia);
 2015 - Mons (Belgium), Plzeň (Czech Republic);
 2016 - San Sebastián (Spain), Wrocław (Poland);
 2017 - Aarhus (Denmark), Paphos (Cyprus);

2018 - Leeuwarden (Netherlands), Valletta (Malta);

2019 - Matera (Italy), Plovdiv (Bulgaria).

2020s

2020 - Rijeka (Croatia), Galway (Ireland);

2021 - Eleusis (Greece), Novi Sad (Serbia), Timișoara (Romania) (originally planned for 2021-2022, but postponed due to COVID-19);

2022 - Kaunas (Lithuania), Esch-sur-Alzette (Luxembourg), Novi Sad (Serbia);

2023 - Veszprém (Hungary), Eleusis (Greece), Timișoara (Romania);

2024 - Bad Ischl (Austria), Tartu (Estonia), Bodø (Norway).

Year 2025

2025 - Chemnitz (Germany), Nova Gorica/Gorizia (Slovenia/Italy).

An analysis from the geographical distribution point of view

The European Capitals of Culture initiative has involved numerous cities throughout the continent, promoting culture, international cooperation, art, tourism and the economy. The analysis of the geographical distribution reveals trends that reflect the political geography and the cultural policies of the various states. The title has been awarded to cities in almost all the countries of geographical Europe, with a strong focus on the members of the European Union, but also openings to candidate or associated countries.

Several countries have had more than one city designated. The sources present some variations in the counts per country. According to one of the most comprehensive sources, the countries with the most capitals (including future designations up to 2029) are:

- France: 5 cities (Paris, Avignon, Lille, Marseille, Bourges);
- Belgium: 4 cities (Antwerp, Bruges, Brussels, Mons);
- Germany: 4 cities (Berlin, Weimar, Essen, Chemnitz) (An earlier source indicates only 3);
- Greece: 4 cities (Athens, Thessaloniki, Patras, Eleusis);

- Italy: 4 cities (Florence, Bologna, Genoa, Matera);

- Portugal: 4 cities (Lisbon, Porto, Évora, Guimarães) (An earlier source indicates only 2);

- Spain: 4 cities (Madrid, Santiago de Compostela, Salamanca, San Sebastián);

- Austria: 3 cities (Graz, Linz, Bad Ischl) (An earlier source indicates only 2);

- Finland: 3 cities (Helsinki, Turku, Oulu) (An earlier source indicates only 2);

- Ireland: 3 cities (Dublin, Cork, Galway);

- Luxembourg: 3 cities (Luxembourg twice, Esch-sur-Alzette);

- Norway: 3 cities (Bergen, Stavanger, Bodø) (An earlier source indicates only 1);

- Netherlands: 3 cities (Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Leeuwarden) (An earlier source indicates only 2);

- Poland: 3 cities (Krakow, Wrocław, Lublin);

- Czech Republic: 3 cities (Prague, Plzeň, České Budějovice);

- Denmark: 2 cities (Copenhagen, Aarhus);

- Estonia: 2 cities (Tallinn, Tartu) (An earlier source indicates only 1);

- Latvia: 2 cities (Riga, Liepāja);

- Lithuania: 2 cities (Vilnius, Kaunas);

- United Kingdom: 2 cities (Glasgow, Liverpool) (Some earlier sources indicate only one or suggest verification);

- Romania: 2 cities (Sibiu, Timișoara) (An earlier source indicates only 1);

- Slovakia: 2 cities (Košice, Trenčín);

- Slovenia: 2 cities (Maribor, Nova Gorica);

- Sweden: 2 cities (Stockholm, Umeå) (An earlier source indicates Stockholm and Kiruna);

- Hungary: 2 cities (Pécs, Veszprém).

The countries with only one city designated (again considering up to 2029) are Bulgaria, Cyprus, Croatia, Iceland, North Macedonia, Malta, Serbia, Turkey (An earlier source lists Estonia, Norway, Iceland, Serbia, North Macedonia among those with one city).

As said, some cities, such as Luxembourg, have been designated more than once. There have been years with more than 2 cities (such as 2000 with 9 cities), and 2025 marks the first European case of 2 cross-border cities: Nova Gorica (Slovenia) and Gorizia (Italy).

Analyzing the distribution by geographical macro-area (Western, Southern, Northern, Eastern), several trends emerge:

Western Europe showed a strong initial concentration. Cities like Paris, Berlin, Amsterdam, Brussels dominated in the first 15 years. These cities are characterized by mature economies, high urbanization and consolidated cultural infrastructures, with a large historical cultural production.

Southern Europe has had a strong presence since the beginning (Athens, Florence, Lisbon, Madrid). The Mediterranean cities, often with a rich historical-artistic heritage but also with socio-economic problems, have used the designation to achieve revitalization and tourism enhancement.

Northern Europe has seen growth especially from the 90s onwards (Stockholm, Reykjavik, Turku, Aarhus). These cities, characterized by high standards of quality of life and well-organized cultural systems, have used the title to consolidate identity and innovation.

Eastern Europe, relatively absent in the initial phase (80s-90s), has had a great growth from 2000 onwards. Cities like Krakow, Sibiu, Košice, Plovdiv, Timișoara have represented the integration of the new EU member countries, the strengthening of transnational cultural networks and urban regeneration (post-industrial or post-socialist).

In summary, the geographical distribution reflects a growing attention to the cultural diversity of the continent. In the early years (1985-1995) the title was concentrated in the founding countries or large traditional centers (West and South). An intermediate phase (1995-2004) saw the opening to Southern Europe, especially Spain, Portugal, Italy, Greece. After 2004,

with the enlargement of the EU, there was a strong growth of cities in Eastern Europe, using the title as an instrument of integration and regeneration. From 2010 onwards, there has been greater attention towards Northern and cross-border cities, supporting innovation and new cultural narratives.

The evolution of the choice of Capitals clearly reflects the political, economic and cultural transformation of Europe in the last forty years. There has been a shift from cities that embodied the traditional idea of “cultural capital”, linked to historical heritage (Athens, Florence, Berlin, Paris), to cities of Southern Europe as crossroads of civilization and laboratories of urban revival, linked to cultural tourism, to cities of the East for integration and urban/social regeneration (Krakow, Riga, Vilnius), up to Northern and peripheral cities for cultural models based on sustainability, innovation and social inclusion (Umeå, Bodø, Kiruna, Nova Gorica - Gorizia). This progressive geographical and cultural opening tells the story of the EU's attempt to balance tradition and innovation, center and periphery, consolidated cultural heritage and contemporaneity.

The demographic dimension

The title of European Capital of Culture has touched very different cities.

The analysis of the number of inhabitants of the designated cities shows how the program has expanded its scope over time.

In the initial phase (80s and 90s), large metropolises were often chosen. These include:

- Paris (1989), with over 2,1 million inhabitants;
- Madrid (1992), with about 3,4 million inhabitants;
- West Berlin/Berlin (1988), with over 3,6 million inhabitants;
- Istanbul (2010), with over 15 million inhabitants.

In recent years, cities of this size have become rarer. A significant share of capitals belongs to the “large city” category (between 500.000 and 1.000.000 inhabitants). Significant examples are:

- Amsterdam (1987), approximately 935.000 inhabitants
- Marseille (2013), approximately 877.000 inhabitants

- Stockholm (1998), approximately 989.000 inhabitants
- Vilnius (2009), approximately 614.000 inhabitants (2014 population in the table, but text indicates it here)
- Glasgow (1990), over 630.000 inhabitants These are cities with solid cultural and tourist infrastructures.

Over the past two decades, the choice of medium-sized cities (between 100.000 and 500.000 inhabitants) has become more established. These cities often represent excellent examples of cultural vitality. Examples include:

- Graz (2003), approximately 305.000 inhabitants;
- Porto (2001), 231.800 inhabitants;
- Wrocław (2016), approximately 673.700 inhabitants (2016 population in the table, text includes it in the averages);
- Kaunas (2022), approximately 304.000 inhabitants.

Since the 2010s, the programme has seen an increasing presence of small cities (less than 100.000 inhabitants). In these cases, the title has had a highly transformative impact. Notable examples are:

- Valletta (2018), approximately 5.200 inhabitants, explicitly defined as the smallest capital ever designated.
- Bad Ischl (2024), approximately 16.300 inhabitants
- Pafos (2017), approximately 32.800 inhabitants
- Esch-sur-Alzette (2022), approximately 37.400 inhabitants

There are also special cases. Reykjavik (2000), despite being the national capital, had about 137.000 inhabitants. The European Capitals of Culture 2025, Nova Gorica (Slovenia) and Gorizia (Italy), are the first case of a cross-border city, presenting themselves together for a total of about 70.000 inhabitants. Other examples concern projects on a metropolitan or regional scale, such as Essen (2010) which represented the entire Ruhr region (over 5 million inhabitants), or Lille (2004) which involved a large cross-border area.

In short, in the early years (1985-2000), large national capitals or large urban centers prevailed. From 2000 onwards, the program has expanded to include medium-sized and small cities,

as well as cross-border and regional projects. This evolution reflects a more widespread and inclusive cultural vision, aimed at valorising less central territories and stimulating innovation and regeneration even outside the historical metropolises.

Duration and organizational methods of events

The programme of a European Capital of Culture officially extends over the entire calendar year. However, preparatory activities and preliminary events can start several years in advance. The official duration is twelve months, but the extended duration, including preparatory events, can be up to five years. The example of Kaunas 2022, which started activities in 2017, five years early, illustrates this practice of long-term involvement.

The average number of events organised varies significantly between cities. The average is around 1.000-1.500 events during the official year. There are lows of around 450 events (e.g. Lille 2006) and highs of over 2.800 events (e.g. Veszprém-Balaton 2023). Esch-sur-Alzette, for example, organised 1.351 events in 2022, while Marseille-Provence hosted over 900 in 2013.

The participation of artists and organisations is a key indicator. On average, around 1.000-3.000 artists are involved. Minimums can be around 1.000 artists (e.g. Kaunas 2022 for the official year) and maximums can exceed 19.000 artists (e.g. Kaunas 2022 considering the period 2017-2022). As for organisations, Esch2022 collaborated with around 160 project partners (public institutions, associations, foundations). These figures highlight the importance of the programme in promoting the active participation of local communities and enhancing European cultural variety.

Financial investments

Financial aspects play a crucial role in the programme. The average budget allocated to a European Capital of Culture varies according to size, ambition and resources, generally ranging between €30 and €100 million. Specific examples include Mons 2015 with €70,5 million, Timișoara 2023 with over €20 million invested in the cultural programme, and Liepāja 2027 with €10 million allocated by the national government and an additional €12,5 million from EU funds and other sources.

Source of funding:

- European Union, mainly through the Creative Europe programme, which has a budget of €2,44 billion for the period 2021-2027.
- National and local governments, as in the case of the Serbian government which invested around €75 million for Novi Sad 2021.
- Private sponsors and partnerships, as demonstrated by Timișoara 2023 which involved over 50 companies with a contribution of over €4 million.

In terms of record examples and minimum investments, Marseille-Provence 2013 stands out with an operating budget of around €100 million and over €600 million invested in new cultural infrastructure. Smaller cities or cities with limited resources have managed programmes with lower budgets, but specific details on the minimums are not always publicly available.

The analysis of the relationship between investments, number of events and city size highlights some trends. Large cities tend to have high budgets, focused not only on programming but also on long-lasting infrastructure works. Large urban agglomerations or regions (e.g. Essen/Ruhrgebiet) generate economies of scale and intense programming. Medium-sized cities show a good correlation between budget, population and events, managing to combine ambitious programmes with a good cost/event ratio (e.g. Kaunas). Small cities manage resources in a targeted way, focusing on events with a high symbolic impact and heritage valorization, although organizational costs can be high for them too, especially if infrastructure works or regeneration programs are needed (e.g. Paphos, Eleusis).

In general, while larger cities tend to have larger budgets and organize more events, there is no strictly proportional relationship. Medium-small cities often invest more “per capita” than metropolises, using the title as a lever for cultural and tourist development. Higher budgets are associated with important infrastructural investments (museums, cultural centers, redevelopments). The ability to attract EU funds and private investments is crucial for economic success.

We propose an Indicator to summarize the “cultural density” generated: Cultural Intensity Indicator (CII). Calculated as Number of Events / Inhabitants \times 1 / Million € of Budget, the outcome is expressed with a higher value that indicates high cultural intensity with a limited budget. Applying the indicator, Athens 1985 shows a very low CII (0,0000167), reflecting a limited initial program and very low budgets. Liverpool 2008 has a higher IIC (0,0001077), with many more events and a high budget, but still moderate due to the high population. Matera 2019 reaches a very high IIC (0,0005) thanks to the small population, the high number of events and a significant investment, demonstrating the effectiveness of medium-small cities. Nova Gorica - Gorizia 2025 stands at an intermediate IIC (0,0002185), with estimated data, confirming the ability of small cities to organize a significant number of events with proportionate investments.

The general trend of the IIC shows a progressive growth from 1985 to 2025. From the symbolic capitals of the 80s and 90s (very low intensity), we moved on to the massive programs of the 2000s (moderate growth of IIC due to high costs), to the prominence of small cities in the 2010s and 2020s (very high intensity/efficiency), up to the cross-border projects of the 2020s and 2025s (search for balance between sustainability and cultural density).

In conclusion, over time the title has transformed from an élite event to a development driver, shifting the focus to medium-small realities and increasing cultural density per inhabitant. An attempt is being made to improve the cost/benefit ratio and use the title for targeted, sustainable and participatory programs. Nova Gorica - Gorizia 2025 seems to confirm this trend of a “balanced project”.

General public participation

In general terms, the impact on public participation has been significant, both in terms of visitor influx and local community involvement. Host cities have seen significant increases in tourist numbers and local participation, strengthening social cohesion and participation.

In terms of visitors attracted, we note the following:

- ECoC cities attract on average between 500.000 and 2 million visitors during their Capital year;

- Peaks can reach over 5 million visitors in exceptional cases;
- Liverpool 2008 recorded over 9 million visitors, consolidating its tourism reputation;
- Marseille-Provence 2013 recorded over 11 million visits, with approximately 2 million additional visitors compared to the previous year;
- Plovdiv 2019 saw a 27% increase in foreign tourists, with over 1,2 million visitors from other Bulgarian cities,
- Kaunas 2022 welcomed more than 280.000 tourists, reaching pre-pandemic numbers, with an estimated increase of 25%;
- Esch-sur-Alzette 2022 attracted 512.000 visitors (60% from Luxembourg, 27% from France);
- Reykjavik 2000 saw a 20% increase in tourist numbers,
- The most visited capitals include Liverpool, Riga (2014), and Tallinn (2011).

A recent study of 34 ECoC cities between 1998 and 2014 found an average increase of 8% in overnight stays during the event year, particularly significant in cities with around 150.000 inhabitants. The impact on tourism not only brought more visitors but also had a positive economic impact. For example, Leeds 2023 (presented in the source as an ECoC, but was a UK City of Culture) saw a 10% growth in the local tourism economy and created over 1.300 new jobs. Many cities saw an increase in spending in tourism sectors.

Local community participation was equally significant:

- In Plovdiv 2019, 60% of residents participated in events, a 44% increase from 2017.
- In Esch-sur-Alzette 2022, around 21% of residents actively participated, with 60% planning to continue.
- Smaller cities, such as Patras 2006, Rijeka 2020, and Esch-sur-Alzette 2022, saw significant resident participation, often exceeding 30% of the population. Active participation enhanced local cultural identity and strengthened social cohesion. The impact varied by city size, with medium-sized cities seeing significant increases in visitors and participation, while large cities had a larger impact in absolute numbers.

Cultural and urban impact

The programme has had a profound impact on the urban and cultural development of host cities. Increased visibility and investment have led to the creation of new infrastructure and projects that have transformed the urban landscape, leaving a lasting legacy. ECoC cities have traditionally invested in new infrastructure such as public halls, multi-purpose buildings, concert halls, theatres, museums and public spaces. These places have acted as a catalyst for urban renewal, improving overall accessibility. Examples of interest include:

- Liverpool 2008: Renovation of the Museum of Liverpool and Everyman Theatre, creation of the Liverpool Arena;
- Dublin 1991: Creation of the Grand Canal Theatre (now Bord Gáis Energy Theatre), redevelopment of docklands;
- Pécs 2010: Renovation of the Pecs National Theatre, creation of the Zsolnay Cultural Quarter;
- Athens 1985: Renovation of the National Archaeological Museum and the Benaki Museum;
- Glasgow 1990: renovation of the Glasgow School of Art and the Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum;
- Brussels 2000: renovation of the Bozar, extension of the Musée Magritte Museum;
- Porto 2001: construction of the Casa da Música;
- Bergen 2000: renovation of the National Theatre and the Art Museum;
- Lisbon 1994: inauguration of the Centro Cultural de Belém;
- Marseille-Provence 2013: construction of the MuCEM and renovation of the Vieux Port;
- Mons 2015: renovation of the Belfry and creation of new exhibition spaces;
- Matera 2019: restoration of the historical centre (Sassi) and creation of new exhibition spaces (e.g. Ridola Museum);
- Kaunas 2022: development of the Kaunas 2022 Cultural Centre and renovation of the National Theatre;

- Nova Gorica and Gorizia 2025: creation of new shared cultural spaces (open-air theatres, galleries) in the *Borderless* project;
- Timișoara 2023: renovation of the National Theatre and creation of the Faber Cultural Centre. Urban regeneration has been a central component, improving the urban fabric and public infrastructure, as in the case of Rijeka 2020 (waterfront revitalization) or Nova Gorica and Gorizia (shared spaces). Leeds 2023 (presented as ECoC, but is UK City of Culture) has expanded its museum and theatre facilities.

Many cities have created permanent cultural projects, which continue to influence the cultural scene even after the title ends. Some examples include:

- Bergen 2000: The Bergen International Festival, initiated during the Capital Year, has become a major annual event;
- Stockholm 1998: The Fotografiska Museum has become a visited space in the city;
- Lublin(2023): The Lublin Culture Centre(presented as having been created during the ECoC, although Lublin is designated an ECoC for 2029) continues to offer permanent events;
- Athens 1985: Launch of arts education programmes and annual cultural events;
- Glasgow 1990: Establishment of the Glasgow International Festival of Visual Art;
- Dublin 1991: Launch of the Dublin Theatre Festival;
- Brussels 2000: Creation of the Festival d'Automne;
- Porto 2001: Launch of the Festival Internacional de Música de Serralves;
- Lisbon 1994: Establishment of the Festival de Sintra;
- Pécs 2010: Launch of the Zsolnay Cultural Quarter;
- Marseille-Provence 2013: Creation of the MuCEM;
- Mons 2015: Establishment of the Mons 2015 Festival;
- Matera 2019: Launch of the *Matera 2019* project with a citizen participation's process;

- Kaunas 2022: Establishment of the Kaunas Cultural Centre;
- Nova Gorica and Gorizia 2025: Joint project *Borderless* with shared cultural spaces (yet to be completed);
- Timișoara 2023: Launch of a residency programme for creatives and creation of a new concert hall (part of a legacy plan). Liverpool, in particular, has continued to develop long-term artistic and cultural initiatives, while Sibiu 2007 created the International Theatre Festival. Rijeka 2020 has fostered the development of new spaces for contemporary art.

Measurable cultural heritage goes beyond physical changes, including long-term benefits for the cultural, economic and social scene. Some measurable impacts cited include:

- Lyon 2003 (presented as ECoC, but designated ECoC was Graz, Austria): birth of the *Festival of Light (Fête des Lumières)*, with documented economic impact.
- Riga 2014: urban renewal plan with redevelopment of the Daugava riverbanks, creating permanent public spaces; public art projects.
- Vienna 2001(presented as ECoC, but designated ECoC was Porto and Rotterdam): strengthening international cultural networks, new festivals, platform for cooperation; renovated MuseumsQuartier. Other measurable impacts over time were an increase in international visitors (e.g. Athens +10%, Glasgow +15%, Porto +30%, Pécs +45%, Marseille-Provence +~2 million, Matera +60%, Kaunas +55%, Mons +50%), growth in the number of annual cultural events (Dublin +20%, Lisbon +40%), improved international image (Glasgow, Mons) and improved European cooperation (Brussels, Vienna).

Most awarded cities

The cities designated as European Capital of Culture have received direct and indirect recognition, using the title to increase their international visibility.

Among the awards established by the European Community is the Melina Mercouri Award, given annually in recognition of the contribution to the promotion of culture and sustainable urban development.

- Athens 1985: Although it did not receive the award immediately, it laid the foundations for the Programme;
- Glasgow 1990: Received the award for the success of its programme and its ability to regenerate the city through culture;
- Liverpool 2008: Received the award for the success of the programme and the positive impact on the cultural economy;
- Novi Sad 2022: Won the Melina Mercouri Award, with a positive evaluation for inclusion and accessibility.

Many cities have received other recognitions and awards, enhancing their international standing.

- Glasgow 1990: After the ECoC title, it received recognitions such as being named a UNESCO City of Music;
- Porto 2001: Participated in design and architecture competitions, winning awards related to urban redevelopment and heritage;
- Marseille-Provence 2013: Source indicates that it was named a UNESCO City of Culture (note: UNESCO does not have a standard City of Culture title). Projects such as the MuCEM have won international awards;
- Kaunas 2022: Received recognition for cultural sustainability and innovation, awarded as an emerging center.

Some cities have submitted multiple nominations.

- Glasgow applied in 1990 (awarded) and again in 2020 (not selected), but the 1990 experience has built a lasting reputation;
- Leeuwarden 2018 has continued to win sustainability and innovation awards after being awarded the title.

The most awarded cities have not only received direct recognition but have also used the title to increase their international visibility and win further awards.

ECoCs have also promoted sustainability and inclusion pathways, leading to specific environmental, social and urban awards.

- Environmental: Marseille-Provence 2013 (candidate for European Green Capital in 2017), Kaunas 2022 (awards for green mobility and resource management), Veszprém 2023 (sustainability integrated into the program), Rijeka 2020 (initia-

tives *Green Wave, Citizens' Council*), San Sebastián 2016 (integration of Agenda 21 principles);

- Social: Bilbao 2016 (Fair Saturday Award for use of culture for social change), Novi Sad 2022 (Melina Mercouri Award with positive evaluation for inclusion and accessibility), Elefsina 2023 (awards for social initiatives);
- Urban Development: Lille 2004 (European Prize for Urban Public Space for the redevelopment of Wazemmes), Turku 2011 (awards for innovative public spaces), Nova Gorica and Gorizia 2025 (awards for cross-border cooperation and shared cultural spaces).

The title of European Capital of Culture has acted as a catalyst for awards and sustainable development. It has stimulated urban regeneration interventions (Marseille-Provence with significant infrastructure investments, Riga with redevelopment and positive impact, Leeds 2023 – note: presented as ECoC but UK City of Culture); it has promoted environmental initiatives and encouraged artistic development with cultural awards (Liverpool with long-term projects, Sibiu with increased events and awards, Mons with high-profile events).

Statistical curiosities

The program is rich in data and special records that reflect its variety and inhomogeneity.

- First Capital: Athens in 1985.
- Northernmost Capital: Reykjavik (Iceland) in 2000.
- Southernmost Capital: Nicosia (Cyprus) in 2017, notable for its geopolitical position as a divided city.
- Smallest Capital by Population: Valletta (Malta) in 2018, with about 5.200 inhabitants, explicitly listed as the smallest. One source also mentions Vaduz (Liechtenstein) in 2024 with notable impact, but the title for 2024 has been awarded to Bodø, Tartu and Bad Ischl, and the same source links Vaduz to the candidacy of Feldkirch (Austria), which was later withdrawn.
- Capital with the greatest increase in tourism: Liverpool 2008 (UK) recorded over 9 million visitors, one of the most significant increases.

Some cities are considered the most “surprise” Capitals.

- Patras 2006 (Greece) is seen as a surprise because it was not one of the main Greek metropolises, but it has managed to relaunch itself with cultural projects;
- Rijeka 2020 (Croatia), initially less known, was a revelation, highlighting its industrial and maritime culture and creating a spirit of innovation.

There have been years with multiple capitals at the same time:

- One source cites 1985 with Athens and Bergen, but other sources and the timeline only list Athens for 1985 and Bergen for 2000;
- One source cites 2000 with Reykjavik and Aviero (Portugal), but other sources list 9 cities for 2000 (Avignon, Bergen, Bologna, Brussels, Krakow, Helsinki, Prague, Reykjavik, Santiago de Compostela), and Aviero is not among them;
- 2011 featured Tallinn (Estonia) and Turku (Finland), with a focus on Eastern Europe and Scandinavia;
- 2022 featured 3 cities: Esch-sur-Alzette (Luxembourg), Kaunas (Lithuania), and Novi Sad (Serbia), highlighting Europe’s cultural diversity and lesser-known cities.

These curiosities enrich the history of the program and reflect the variety of cultures, geographies and cities involved.

Final remarks

Quantitative analysis shows that the European Capitals of Culture programme has had a profound and multifaceted impact on the cities involved. It has contributed to cultural growth and economic, social and urban development. Cities of different sizes have benefited from the recognition, recording significant increases in tourism and gaining global visibility with lasting effects.

Public participation is one of the key indicators of effectiveness, with a notable increase in visitors and long-term interest in cultural activities. Permanent projects (museums, theatres, public spaces) born thanks to the title leave a lasting legacy that continues to influence cultural life. The cultural and urban impact has led to new infrastructure and a significant redevelopment of spaces, transforming urban areas and improving the quality of life.

A key aspect that has emerged is the importance of sustainability. Cities that have incorporated ecological and social policies into their programmes have improved their reputation and won significant awards. This shows that the ECoC increasingly has a dimension of sustainability and inclusiveness, essential for future challenges.

Emerging trends

Several trends emerge as the programme evolves. There is a growing interest in geographical and cultural diversity. From the initial large cities, there has been a shift to a broad involvement of smaller and peripheral cities, which use the programme to promote uniqueness and renew their international image. Smaller cities stand out as engines of cultural innovation.

The idea that the ECoC is a continuous process of development, not just an annual event, is consolidating. Cities that have invested in permanent projects and long-lasting initiatives have achieved great results in terms of attractiveness, social cohesion and urban renewal.

Finally, an emerging aspect is the centrality of sustainability. Cities use the title to promote culturally rich, socially inclusive and environmentally responsible development models. This helps to consolidate the ECoC as a tool that celebrates culture, environment and community.

In summary, the European Capitals of Culture have had a profound impact on cultural, social and economic growth. Data shows continued success in terms of visitors, urban development and cultural projects. Emerging trends point to a future orientation towards sustainability and geographical diversity, reflecting Europe’s changes and challenges. Smaller and peripheral cities emerge as important actors, and long-term projects gain centrality, shaping a more inclusive and lasting future for the European Capitals of Culture.

Figures and charts

The following tables synthesize the statistics related to the European Capitals of Culture (ECoC), organizing the key data reported in this essay. These tables cover various quantitative aspects of the program, from its overall scope to the specific impacts in terms of events, investments, and audience influx.

A. General statistics of the ECoC program (1985-2025)

This table summarizes the overall data of the program from its establishment in 1985 up to 2025.



Indicator	Value	Reference note/period
Years of Activity	1985-2025	Total operating period of the program
Total number of designated cities	79	From 1985 to 2025. Counted over 40 years.
Total number of countries involved	36	Countries that have had at least 1 city nominated. Includes EU Member States, candidate countries (e.g., Serbia), and EEA countries (e.g., Norway, Iceland).
Average number of cities designated (1985-1999)	1 (or 1,07)	In the first fifteen years, normally 1 city/year. A total of 16 capitals in 15 years. Exact average 1,07.
Average number of cities designated (from 2000 onwards)	2,3 (or 2,42)	The practice has stabilized with 2 cities/year, except for exceptions. From 2000 to 2025, 63 capitals in 26 years. Exact average 2,42. Overall average to date is 79 nominations in 40 years, with a tendency towards 2 or 3 capitals/year.
Record year with the most capitals simultaneously	2000	9 cities designated to celebrate the new millennium. Unbeaten record.
Maximum number of candidate cities in a single call	Up to 20	Examples in Italy, Germany, or Poland. (e.g., Italy 2019).
Percentage of cities in Central-Eastern Europe	~ 40%	From 2000 to date.

B. Geographical distribution by macro-region (1985-2025)

This table shows the distribution of the European Capitals of Culture by geographical macro-region, highlighting its evolution over time.

A large, bold, blue letter 'B' is positioned on the right side of the page. It is a simple, sans-serif font with a slight shadow or gradient effect, making it stand out against the white background.

Macro-region	Number of Capitals	Main countries cited by sources	Key characteristics cited by sources
Western Europe	21	France, Germany, Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg. Examples: Paris, Berlin, Amsterdam, Brussels.	Strong initial concentration (1980s-1990s). Historical cultural tradition, mature economies, high urbanization. Clear dominance in the initial phase (1985-1995).
Southern Europe	19	Italy, Spain, Greece, Portugal. Examples: Athens, Florence, Lisbon, Madrid.	Strong presence from the beginning. Historical-artistic heritage, tourism revival and urban regeneration. Opening in the 1990s, in particular after Maastricht.
Eastern Europe	17	Poland, Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovenia, Romania. Examples: Krakow, Sibiu, Košice, Plovdiv, Timișoara.	Relatively absent in the initial phase. Significant growth from 2000 onwards. Post-socialist regeneration, new cultural identities, culture as a lever for development. Strong growth after 2004 (post-EU enlargement).
Northern Europe	10	Sweden, Finland, Denmark, Norway, Iceland. Examples: Stockholm, Reykjavik, Turku, Aarhus.	Growth from the 1990s. High standards of living, advanced urban planning, organized cultural systems. Cultural innovation, sustainability and urban welfare. Greater focus from 2010 onwards.

C. Distribution by country (1985-2029)

This table presents the countries with the highest number of cities designated as European Capital of Culture.



Country	Number of designated cities	Examples of designated cities (with year)
Italy	4	Florence (1986), Bologna (2000), Genoa (2004), Matera (2019)
Spain	4	Madrid (1992), Santiago de Compostela (2000), Salamanca (2002), San Sebastián (2016)
Greece	4	Athens (1985), Thessaloniki (1997), Patras (2006), Elefsina (2023)
France	5	Paris (1989), Avignon (2000), Lille (2004), Marseille (2013), Bourges (2028)
Germany	4	Berlin (1988), Weimar (1999), Essen (2010), Chemnitz (2025)
Belgium	4	Antwerp (1993), Bruges (2002), Brussels (2000), Mons (2015)
Portugal	4	Lisbon (1994), Porto (2001), Guimarães (2012), Évora
Ireland	3	Dublin (1991), Cork (2005), Galway (2020)
Luxembourg	3	Luxembourg (1995, 2007), Esch-sur-Alzette (2022)
Netherlands	3	Amsterdam (1987), Rotterdam (2001), Leeuwarden (2018)
Poland	3	Krakow (2000), Wrocław (2016), Lublin (2029)
Czech Republic	3	Prague (2000), Plzeň (2015), České Budějovice (2028)
Austria	3	Graz (2003), Linz (2009), Bad Ischl (2024)
Finland	3	Helsinki (2000), Turku (2011), Oulu
Norway	3	Bergen (2000), Stavanger (2008), Bodø (2024)

D. Distribution of cities by population (with examples)

This table summarizes the classification of the European Capitals of Culture based on their demographic size.



Category	Population	Main examples cited	Prevalent period	Characteristics
Metropolis	Over 1.000.000	Paris, Berlin, Madrid, Istanbul	1985–2010	Large national capitals, established urban centers. Consolidated cultural output. Predominantly present in the initial phase.
Large Cities	500.000 – 1.000.000	Amsterdam, Stockholm, Marseille, Vilnius, Glasgow	1987–Present	Solid cultural and tourist infrastructure.
Medium-sized Cities	100.000 – 500.000	Graz, Porto, Wrocław, Kaunas	2000–Present	Examples of cultural vitality and regeneration. Good correlation between budget/ events/population.
Small Cities	Less than 100.000	Valletta, Paphos, Bad Ischl, Esch-sur-Alzette. Weimar, Avignon, Santiago de Compostela, Bruges, Salamanca, Stavanger, Umeå, Mons, Matera, Galway, Rijeka, Elefsina, Novi Sad, Timișoara (in some editions), Veszprém, Bodø, Tartu, Chemnitz, Nova Gorica are cited with a population of less than 500.000.	2010–Present	Strongly transformative impact. Targeted resource management. Often invest more per capita.
Particular Cases	Variable	Nova Gorica/Gorizia (cross-border, 70.000 combined pop.), Essen/Ruhrgebiet (regional, >5 million pop.), Lille (cross-border area). Reykjavik (national capital, 137.000 pop. in 2000).	2004–Present	Projects on a metropolitan/ regional or cross-border scale.

E. Statistics on events and public participation

This table summarizes the data related to the number of events organized and the participation of the public and artists.



Indicator	Average/range	Note/specific examples
Extended duration (with preparatory events)	Up to five years	Example: Kaunas started activities in 2017 for 2022.
Average number of events per capital	1.000 – 1.500	During the official year.
Minimum number of events recorded	~ 300	Example: Paphos 2017. Lille 2006: ~ 450.
Maximum number of events recorded	Over 2.800	Example: Veszprém-Balaton 2023. Essen/Ruhrgebiet 2010: over 2.500.
Average participation of artists involved	1.000 – 3.000	During the official year. Kaunas 2022: ~ 1.000.
Maximum participation of artists involved	Over 19.000	Example: Kaunas 2022 (period 2017-2022).
Visitors attracted (average range)	500.000 – 2.000.000	During the capital year.
Visitors attracted (exceptional peaks)	Over 5 million	In exceptional cases.
Visitors attracted (record)	Over 11 million	Example: Marseille-Provence 2013. Over 9 million for Liverpool 2008.
Average increase in tourism (overnight stays)	8%	Study on 34 cities (1998-2014), significant in medium-sized cities.
Increase in tourism (specific examples)	From 10% to 60%	Athens 1985: +10%. Brussels 2000: +25%. Bergen 2000: +35%. Pécs 2010: +45%. Kaunas 2022: +55%. Matera 2019: +60%.
Local participation (specific examples)	From 21% to 60%	Esch-sur-Alzette 2022: 21%. Plovdiv 2019: 60%. Patras, Rijeka, Esch: 30%.

F. Economic and investment statistics

This table summarizes the data related to the budgets and funding sources of the program.



Indicator	Value (average/range)	Note/specific examples
Average budget per Capital of Culture	Between €30 million and €100 million	Varies significantly.
Examples of operating/ program budgets	Variable	Mons 2015: €70,5 million. Timișoara 2023: Over €20 million (program). Kaunas 2022: ~ €16 million. Paphos 2017: ~ €8 million. Elefsina 2023: ~ €24 million. Matera 2019: ~ €50 million (including infrastructure).
Significant infrastructural investments	Over €600 million	Record example: Marseille-Provence 2013 (new cultural infrastructure).
Examples of total budgets (including infrastructure)	Variable	Liverpool 2008: ~ €130 million (operating budget). Essen/Ruhrgebiet 2010: Over €70 million (budget).
Main funding sources	Multiple	European Union (Creative Europe), national and local governments, private sponsors.
EU contribution	Variable	Creative Europe program: €2,44 billion (2021-2027).
Contribution of national/ local governments (example)	~ €75 million	Serbian government for Novi Sad 2021.
Contribution of private sponsors (example)	Over €4 million	Timișoara 2023: Over 20 million RON (~ €4 million) from over 50 companies.
Correlation between investments/events/ population	Variable	Large cities: high budgets, infrastructural investments. Medium-sized cities: good correlation. Small cities: targeted management, high per-capita investment. High organizational costs even for small cities. Infrastructure factor increases budget. Capacity to attract EU/private funds is crucial.

G. Cultural Intensity Index (CII) - case studies

The Cultural Intensity Index (CII) is an indicator that we propose to relate events, population, and budget: $CII = (\text{Number of Events} / \text{Inhabitants}) \times (1 / \text{Millions of € Budget})$. A higher value indicates high cultural intensity with a more contained budget. This table shows the application of the CII to some case studies.

General trend of the Cultural Intensity Index IIC (1985-2025):

- 1980s-1990s: Very low cultural intensity (symbolic capitals, few events, low budgets).
- 2000s: Moderate growth (massive programs, event boom, very high costs).
- 2010s-2020s: Very high cultural efficiency (small cities as protagonists, rich programs relative to population).
- From 2020: Search for a balance between sustainability and density (cross-border projects, medium budgets, well-calibrated programs).

The historical trend shows a progressive increase in cultural intensity.



City	Year	Estimated/ recorded events	Estimated/ recorded inhabitants	Estimated/ recorded budget (millions €)	CII Value	Note/significance
Athens	1985	~100	~3.000.000	~2	0,0000167	Very low intensity, symbolic program.
Liverpool	2008	~7.000 (or >350)	~500.000 (or 435.000)	~130	0,0001077	Much higher than Athens, but high costs. Moderate values due to large population.
Matera	2019	~1.500 (or >1.300)	~60.000	~50	0,0005	Very high cultural intensity. Highest among the cases analyzed. Small city with high per-capita investment.
Nova Gorica/ Gorizia	2025	~600-700 (or >1.000)	~85.000	~35 (or 40-45)	0,0002185	Intermediate index, higher than Liverpool, lower than Matera. Confirms trend of small cities.

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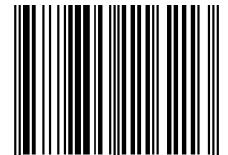
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All the authors have been dealing for years, in an interdisciplinary way through teaching and research, with urban culture and the relationship between architecture, city and politics. Their work develops in the wake of Pierre George's thought on the 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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