



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.

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Learning from ECoC. Towards a handbook of good practices for European Capitals of Culture

Thomas Bisiani, Sonia Prestamburgo, Adriano Venudo

Introduction

This essay concludes the work of mapping, studying and reasoned reflection on ECoCs and tries to draw conclusions through the construction of a decalogue, as a summary outcome of the two-year work of RRR Lab on ECoCs. This final essay should also be understood as a sort of operational tool for entities, operators and administrators of cities intending to undertake the path of candidacy and realization of the title of European Capital of Culture. It is in fact structured as a guideline document to orient and accompany administrations, cultural operators, stakeholders and communities in the ECoC candidacy, as a sort of “manual”, which summarizes in ten points the “tested” strategies observed by RRR Lab in these two years of investigations, and used by various European cities to maximize the cultural, social, economic and urban impact of their “experience” as European Capital of Culture. It is an operational tool, a map that draws a virtuous path of choices and actions aimed at ensuring efficiency and effectiveness in the organizational action of the multifaceted project that underlies the nomination as European Capital of Culture.

Each entry in the Decalogue is born from the observation of concrete experiences of large, medium and small cities, from the analysis of both innovative projects (emblematic infrastructures and architecture, permanent festivals, generative initiatives) and participatory dynamics, which have made “intersectoral governance” and the transversal involvement of the population effective. The aim of this “Decalogue” is to provide a very general and easy to consult and use, but exhaustive, as far as a Decalogue can be, framework of the fundamental stages – from the candidacy phase to the consolidation of the cultural legacy – and of the tools (control rooms, European calls, international networks) necessary to transform the title of ECoC into an opportunity for concrete urban regeneration and sustainable and lasting development. This Decalogue is not limited to listing recommenda-

tions, but intends to promote an integrated and long-term vision, promoting culture as a driver of cohesion and a driver of innovation in the context of architecture and the city. It is designed to be immediately applicable, adaptable to different urban contexts and catalyze new growth opportunities, making each case study of European Capital of Culture “a replicable model” as it is always attentive to the shared values of the European Union, cultural values that reside precisely in the idea of “European urbanity”, of a “European city” of the present and the future.

The transformation of ECoCs

Since 1985, the European Capitals of Culture programme has evolved from a symbolic and predominantly celebratory initiative to one of the longest-running and most influential European mechanisms for cultural innovation and urban transformation. Born with the aim of strengthening mutual understanding between the peoples of the Union, the title has reached 79 cities in 36 countries in 40 years, crossing different political, economic and cultural contexts. From the large metropolises that founded the European identity to small cross-border centres, the programme has constantly redefined the forms of cultural investment, territorial promotion and citizen participation.

In the early years, the title was assigned to a single city per year, almost always large urban centres with a consolidated historical and cultural heritage: Athens (1985), Florence (1986), Amsterdam (1987), Berlin (1988), Paris (1989). These were symbolic cities of European culture, for which the title represented recognition and not a transformative opportunity. Since the 2000s, with the enlargement of the EU and the reform of the program, the mechanism has become more plural, opening up to a multiplicity of cities for each edition and encouraging a progressive geographical decentralization. The current average is two or three cities designated each year, often distributed across different territories and, in some cases, jointly.

Emblematic in this sense is the designation of Nova Gorica and Gorizia for the current year, 2025: the first cross-border European Capital of Culture between Italy and Slovenia, a concrete symbol of cooperation between member states and of the ability of culture to mend historical fractures and build a new shared identity. The GO!2025 project represents a

paradigmatic example of how ECoCs can operate on multiple levels (urban, regional, national and European), integrating regeneration strategies, heritage enhancement, cultural innovation and civic participation.

The program has become, over time, a real driving force for integrated cultural, social and urban development projects, capable of activating new forms of cooperation, infrastructural investments and participatory governance practices. The number of events (between 1.000 and 2.800 on average per city), visitors (over 11 million for example in the case of Marseille-Provence 2013) and budgets spent to “prepare” for the event (from €20 to over €100 million) have progressively increased. These data make it easy to understand that the ECoC initiative is now considered a strategic lever for European cities that want to redefine their identity, invest in culture as a driver of innovation and regeneration and position themselves within European networks of exchange and collaboration.

Within this complex ECoC phenomenon and following its evolution, RRR Lab studies and research in the past two years have identified and systematized the most effective strategies and allowed us to build a real “good practices manual”, based on collected evidence, comparative data and critical analysis of over four decades of experiences with the cataloguing of 40 case studies. And it is precisely in this organic direction that this contribution moves, integrating teaching and research to offer a reasoned and operational synthesis of the main urban approaches that have emerged, of the most recurrent strategies and of the good practices capable of making ECoCs not only successful events, but fruitful and transformative urban processes in a long-term temporal dimension.

Four families of approaches: genealogies and geographies of transformation

The longitudinal analysis of the European Capitals of Culture allows us to identify four large families of approaches, each linked to a specific geographical, economic and cultural context, but also to a specific moment in European history. These families represent recurring, non-rigid models, useful for understanding the different design and strategic trajectories assumed by cities over time.

Large Western Metropolises/Established Heritage: the first editions of the program (1980s and first half of the 1990s) were dominated by cities that were symbols of European identity, often national capitals or established cultural centers: Athens, Florence, Berlin, Paris. The focus was on historical heritage, the promotion of high culture combined with a strong historical-symbolic imprint, with prestigious events and little attention to structural impact or civic participation.

Regeneration in Southern Europe: Since the 2000s, the title has been increasingly interpreted as a lever for relaunching Mediterranean cities, characterized by a great architectural and artistic heritage but also by social, economic or infrastructural criticalities. Matera 2019 represents an emblematic example: a small-sized city, which has built a model of integrated regeneration, enhancing its cultural landscapes and promoting strong community involvement.

Post-socialist regeneration in Eastern Europe: after the enlargement of the European Union, many Eastern European cities have used the title to redefine their cultural identity and regenerate urban spaces inherited from the socialist period. Cities such as Pécs, Maribor, Sibiu, Timișoara have transformed industrial areas into cultural hubs and used the program as a tool for European integration and reconnection with the West.

Innovation and sustainability in Northern Europe and cross-border contexts: Northern European capitals of culture have often adopted strategies oriented towards environmental sustainability, urban quality and cooperation. Umeå, Aarhus, Esch-sur-Alzette and in particular the recent case of Nova Gorica/Gorizia 2025 testify to an approach based on light infrastructures, collaborative networks, social innovation and valorization of diversity. In these cases, the title is not only a tool to promote the image of the city, but becomes a platform for shared experimentation and “active citizenship”.

These four families are accompanied by a single transversal trend: the progressive shift of the center of gravity from large cities to medium-small centers, where the “cultural density per inhabitant” becomes an indicator of efficiency and impact. Smaller cities have demonstrated greater agility in involving citizens, activating local networks and producing lasting lega-

cies, often with proportionally smaller but well-calibrated budgets. This shift indicates a maturation of the program towards more sustainable, inclusive and territorially-linked models.

In addition to these four “historical and geographical families”, it is possible to identify three main operating modes with which the cities have interpreted the title:

A first group focused almost exclusively on the programming of “ephemeral” events, such as festivals, shows, concerts and art exhibitions. This approach, more frequent in the first editions, focuses on the symbolic and celebratory dimension of culture. Emblematic examples are Athens 1985, which proposed a dense cultural program throughout the year without foreseeing structural transformations, and Florence 1986, which enhanced its architectural and artistic tradition through temporary, highly visible events;

a second group favored the redevelopment, regeneration or reuse of existing heritage, both urban and landscape. In these cases, the ECoC was an opportunity to enhance existing resources, activate recovery processes and redesign public and collective spaces. Matera 2019 represents one of the most successful cases, thanks to the recovery of the Sassi and the widespread mobilization of citizens. Maribor 2012, with the transformation of an abandoned shopping center into a cultural space, is also a significant example of creative and participatory reuse;

a third group, smaller but significant, used the title to create new cultural infrastructures and public spaces from scratch, focusing on a tangible material legacy and architectural innovation as a visible sign of transformation. Marseille-Provence 2013 built the MuCEM and the Villa Méditerranée as permanent signs of its cultural rebirth, while Liverpool 2008 enriched its landscape with the Liverpool Arena and other structures that still animate the local cultural scene today, or Graz 2003 that created the new Kunsthaus, entrusting its design to one of the major architects of the radical avant-garde of the Twentieth Century and founder of Archigram, Peter Cook.

These three modalities are not alternatives, but often coexist within the same project, composing a mix calibrated according to the resources, objectives and specific context of each city.

The three fundamental dimensions: European culture, urban development and participation

Regardless of the family to which it belongs, each European Capital of Culture is called upon to integrate three fundamental dimensions, which constitute the backbone of the programme and its most relevant evaluation criteria: the European dimension, urban regeneration and local development, active participation of citizens. The coexistence and balance of these elements are crucial for the success and sustainability of the entire project.

European dimension: this is the founding and identifying element of the initiative. It is not just about hosting artists from other European countries, but about making visible and shared the belonging to a plural European culture, made up of differences but also of common values. It means developing transnational networks, activate partnerships and promote intercultural dialogue. Projects such as “Teatri d’Europa” in Genoa 2004, collaborations with Baltic cities or the cross-border co-designation of Nova Gorica and Gorizia are concrete expressions of this. The quality of the European dimension is measured in the ability to build links, contaminations, exchanges of ideas and people.

Urban, social and economic regeneration and development: ECoCs are no longer isolated cultural events, but tools for structural transformation. Many cities have used the title to rethink their urban layout, recover abandoned spaces, create new public architecture, invest in cultural infrastructure and attract new tourist flows. At the same time, culture has become a lever for social inclusion, the rebirth of marginal neighborhoods and the creation of new urban economies. From Liverpool to Matera, from Rijeka to Marseille, the title has acted as a catalyst for original long-term urban visions.

Participation and cultural citizenship: the direct involvement of the local population is one of the main success criteria of an ECoC. It is not just about increasing the number of spectators, but about activating processes of co-design, symbolic appropriation and widespread responsibility. The most advanced experiences have promoted territorial workshops, courses with schools, programs with migrant communities, participatory art projects, volunteer networks. Inclusivity is not only a social goal, but also a tool for building meaning and cultural legacy.

The cities that have managed to integrate these three dimensions with coherence and a systemic vision have achieved the most significant results, because they have built tangible and intangible infrastructures, strengthened the social fabric and placed culture at the centre of urban development in a European perspective.

Consolidated strategies: recurring paths to success

Over the years, the cities that have achieved the most valuable results as European Capitals of Culture have often shared some fundamental strategies, refined through experience and the progressive professionalization of the programme. These strategies, identified and mapped in these two years of RRR Lab studies on ECoCs, have proved to be crucial in transforming an annual event into a stable and long-lasting cultural process. RRR Lab's investigations and research have allowed us to recognize five binding strategies:

Early start of activities: the most prepared cities started activities already during the candidacy phase, anticipating the trigger of change. In some cases, such as Kaunas 2022, the first initiatives started five years in advance. This period allows for building networks, testing formats, involving communities and sedimenting shared visions;

Multi-scale planning: a winning strategy is to think in terms of local, national and international scale. Successful ECoCs have structured the program in such a way as to enhance the local cultural scene, attract national audiences and position themselves in the European panorama, building a multiplicity of languages, themes and recipients;

Legacy orientation: the most aware cities have conceived the entire project already in function of the "after", placing the issue of legacy at the center. This includes lasting infrastructures, recurring programs, operational networks and long-term cultural visions, as in the case of Liverpool 2008, which transformed the ECoC into a permanent driver of the urban promotion strategy;

Flywheel effect and project continuity: some cities have transformed events born during the ECoC year into structured events of their cultural offer. This is the case of the Sibiu International Theatre Festival, or of many festivals born in Mar-

seille or Rijeka and then maintained over time. The autonomy and replicability of projects are keys to building continuity;

Strategic instrumentalization of the candidacy: even the candidacy paths that did not lead to the assignment of the title have drawn significant benefits from the experience, using the planning effort to review cultural policies, start intersectoral synergies and apply for other alternative awards or titles, such as the European Green Capital or the Italian Capital of Culture. The event can thus become a permanent generative device.

These strategies, often combined, have shown that the success of ECoCs is not so much linked to the scale of the city or the available budget, but to the quality of the vision, the ability to build alliances and the political will to transform the occasion into a wide-ranging cultural project.

Good practices: an “operative decalogue”

The work of analysis, comparison and systemic evaluation conducted on over 40 years of ECoC experiences by RRR Lab has allowed us to identify ten recurring good practices, successfully adopted in different contexts and considered strategic to maximize the economic, social and cultural impact of the ECoC title at the urban level. What emerges is a reasoned decalogue, a compass to orient and guide the work and choices of administrators, designers, curators and local communities.

1 **Control room and long-term strategic planning:**

it is essential to establish an intersectoral governance from the beginning, with vision and decision-making capacity. There must be an immediate launch of pilot events and activities during the candidacy period; a multi-year master plan must be prepared that integrates the ECoC initiatives in the urban development documents and prepares the post-event phase in advance.

2 **Active and transversal involvement of the community:**

“Cantiere-Città”: the involvement of citizens cannot be delegated to the executive phase. It must be activated at the time of the city’s candidacy, through workshops, forums and consultations with attention to neighborhoods, young people, and different social groups. The most effective experiences have built real “citizenship construction sites”. The extension of activities to all stakeholders – from different social classes to “urban ecologies” – must be foreseen to build participation and a sense of belonging and an active role of the subjects involved, both at local and European level.

3 **Investment in permanent and symbolic cultural infrastructures:**

structural investments must focus on emblematic but sustainable projects, selecting “white elephant-free” projects (theaters, museums, creative hubs, multifunctional spaces) characterized by economic sustainability and multifunctio-

nality; creation of urban symbols – iconic architectures and open spaces (city architectures) capable of catalyzing cultural, social and economic flows and of conveying meanings destined to last over time. But also intelligent reuse, multifunctional spaces and light architectures can leave a lasting mark and coherent with the identity of the territory.

4 **Environmental and social sustainability and coherence with EU agendas:**

each ECoC must be in tune with the objectives of EU policies, adopting sustainability, inclusion and accessibility practices. Green mobility, circular economy, equal opportunities and constant attention to environmental impact must become structuring principles of project initiatives.

5 **Construction of cultural heritage:**

the title must generate a shared heritage, both tangible and intangible. Festivals, archives, documentation centers, public works and civic memories are tools to sediment a lasting legacy beyond the year of the event. The urban fabric is itself a cultural element and acts as the main driver of the ECoC; the historical and social layers sedimented over time constitute both the attraction and the shared European heritage, which must be promoted, enhanced and protected with each assignment.

6 **Applications for funds, prizes and other European programs:**

cities that connect the ECoC to other funding lines (Creative Europe, Horizon, LIFE) amplify the impact and prolong the vitality of the project. The application can become a platform for future developments and specific prizes. In addition to the Melina Mercouri there are other prizes: European Green Capital, European Prize for Urban Public Space, European Heritage Label. The capital of culture must be an opportunity for transformation and regeneration, not an end in itself. The basic idea is to use this cultural event to pursue wider objectives.

7 **Narration and urban branding:**

the construction of a coherent and identity-based narrative is an integral part of the success of the initiative. Targeted communication campaigns, community or “common good” maps, storytelling and visual design must converge in a strong, authentic, recognizable image at European level.

8 **Digital and cultural innovation:**

new technologies must be used to extend the cultural experience beyond the physical space of the territorial context. Virtual tours, augmented reality, online archives, participatory platforms and artificial intelligence are tools to be integrated into the design. Explore new digital dimensions, such as the possible European Digital Capital of Culture.

9 **Cross-border collaborations and European networks:**

the ECoC is an extraordinary opportunity to build lasting alliances between cities, regions and European institutions. Cultural networks and joint projects strengthen the European roots of the title. Launch of projects with twinned or neighbouring cities; participation in networks such as the NEC Platform; promotion of cultural exchanges, artistic residencies and international partnerships to integrate the city into European cultural circuits. The model is that of the last European Capital of Culture, Nova Gorica – Gorizia 2025.

10 **Impact assessment and shared indicators:**

measuring results is essential. Cities must equip themselves with monitoring systems, with common and comparable indicators, public reports, qualitative and quantitative analyses. Evaluation is not just a requirement, but a tool for learning and transferring knowledge to other cities. Definition of performance indicators (KPIs) such as number of visitors, tourist expenditure, percentage of local participation; production of annual and post-event reports; transparent and constant com-

munication towards stakeholders and citizens, but above all improving the transfer of knowledge between host cities and developing common indicators for data collection and sharing.

It goes without saying that this list of good practices in the form of a decalogue, although adaptable and modifiable with respect to the variety of urban contexts, constitutes a shared point of reference for those who intend to use the title of European Capital of Culture as a lever for profound and multidimensional urban transformation.

Guiding principles: interscalarity and timeline

Two transversal principles emerge clearly from the overall analysis of the most effective ECoC experiences: interscalarity and the medium-long term timeline.

These two interpretative axes offer a synthetic reading key capable of connecting the different planning, strategic, operational and representative dimensions of the European Capitals of Culture:

1. Interscalarity: ECoCs operate simultaneously on multiple levels of scale. On a geographical level, we observe a shift from large national capitals to medium-small cities, but also a growing inclusion of peripheral and cross-border territories (Nova Gorica/Gorizia 2025). On a territorial level, many candidatures have gone beyond urban administrative limits to involve metropolitan areas, networks of municipalities or entire regions. On a sectoral level, ECoCs have activated connections between culture, tourism, environment, education, welfare, entrepreneurship. Finally, on the social level, they promoted the involvement of citizens, local communities, ethnic and linguistic minorities, young people and disadvantaged people. Interscalarity is what allowed ECoCs to generate a lasting positive impact beyond the time limit of the event itself.
2. Medium-long term timeline: the European Capitals of Culture should not be thought of as an annual event, but as a multi-year process, with anticipatory objectives and lasting impacts. The criterion of the “long-term strategy” is today central in the selection of the winning cities. The best expe-

riences developed by the ECoCs have shown that structural changes – urban regeneration, international reputation, creative economy, social cohesion – require vision, continuity and investment. The success of an ECoC is measured in the ability to build a tangible and intangible legacy: urban fabrics and architecture, infrastructures, policies, habits, networks and narrative that survive the official year of assignment of the title. The legacy is not an epilogue, but the true measure of the effectiveness of a European cultural project.

In this sense, “interscalarity” and “the timeline” are not just analytical categories: they are necessary conditions for an integrated, sustainable and replicable design approach. Only a design that brings together the variety of levels (spatial, social, disciplinary) and that looks beyond the mere temporal deadline can make the title of European Capital of Culture an authentic lever for transformation and integrated development.

Final remarks.

A European model for transformative urban culture

Currently, the European Capitals of Culture represent a powerful laboratory not only for cultural valorization policies in Europe, but also for the development of the quality of architectural design at the urban scale. Their history shows that culture can be much more than a tool for animation and/or territorial marketing: it can become a driver of regeneration, a lever for innovation, a quality standard and a tool for dialogue between different territories, communities and identities, between space and society.

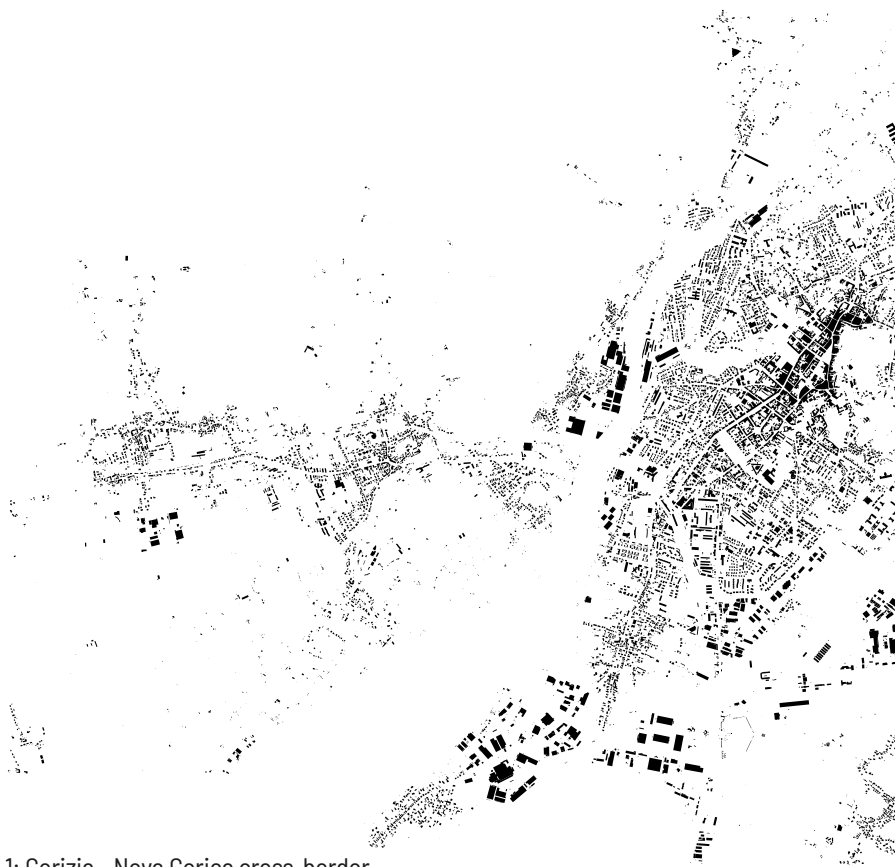
The multiplicity of experiences collected shows that there is no single model, but a set of trajectories and learnings in continuous evolution and adaptation.

This essay, in the form of a manual, which is at the same time a map and a toolbox, an idea and a tool, aims to offer a contribution to this evolution, organizing case studies, insights into significant experiences and summarizing approaches, projects, strategies and investment actions capable of transforming a year of events into a generative cycle in a long-term temporal extension.

The virtuous cases of ECoC have been able to build a dynamic balance between local and European dimensions, temporariness and permanence, spectacularity and depth, strategic vision and listening to the territory, urban wonder and everyday space; a dynamic balance between the project of the “after” even before the “during”.

In a time marked by environmental, social and geopolitical crises and transformations, ECoCs can and must become a space for responsible experimentation, a place where culture becomes civic infrastructure, a common language and therefore a resource for dialogue and comparison, precisely through the language of architecture and the city, a paradigm of European culture. To do so, a new design awareness is needed: interscalar, transdisciplinary, oriented towards transformation and based on real alliances, participation and social inclusion.

At the end, conceived in this perspective, the title of European Capital of Culture is configured not as a coveted goal, but as the point of origin of a shared process of active cultural “citizenship” that embraces the entire European scene, as the sap of new life for a sustainable future of peace and widespread collective well-being.



1: Gorizia - Nova Gorica cross-border urban system.



2: *The Temptation of the Devil*, engraving by Gustave Doré, not dated.

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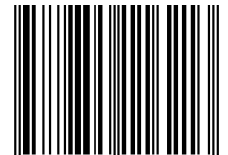
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All the authors have been dealing for years, in an interdisciplinary way through teaching and research, with urban culture and the relationship between architecture, city and politics. Their work develops in the wake of Pierre George's thought on the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