CHAPTER 8

Cultural City Diplomacy

Abstract  Culture and creativity represent an almost ubiquitous component of the international action of cities. A core feature—and a driver—of bilateral ties such as twinning or cooperation agreements, culture and creativity are frequently integrated into the economic strategies aimed at supporting local economic growth and job market. Additionally, over the last decade, cities have been implementing cultural and creative policies to foster social cohesion, promote diversity, and welcome migrants. City networks such as the Organization of World Heritage Cities, the World Cities Culture Forum, and the UNESCO Creative Cities Network act as both representatives of such approaches and as peer learning and advocacy platforms. The chapter will offer an insight into the tools and practices of cultural city diplomacy, taking into consideration both opportunities and challenges. Finally, the chapter will consider the impact of COVID-19 on such a component of city diplomacy.

Keywords  City diplomacy · City branding · Cultural diplomacy · Public diplomacy · Creativity · Cultural and creative industries · Cultural events · European Capital of Culture · COVID-19

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The New Season of an Ancient Practice

The external cultural action of cities is among the most widespread expressions of city diplomacy. It formalizes an age-old practice, in which culture and creativity become tools for asserting a city’s prominence inside and outside the national boundaries. Throughout history, thriving cities such as fifth century Athens, fourteenth century Florence, nineteenth century Paris, up until today’s Abu Dhabi, Auckland, Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Lagos, Montreal, Sapporo, or Shenzhen, have strengthened their political stance and attractiveness by systematically patronizing the arts and enriching their urban tissue with monuments, museums, and cultural events.

Today, cities of all sizes and geographic locations have been multiplying their actions in such a field, often due to a dual evolution in its management.

First, since the second part of the twentieth century, culture has expanded its meaning to include intangible heritage. Such a process has notably led to the UNESCO’s Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2003. This broadening is mostly the result of an international debate criticizing a restrictive vision of cultural heritage based on its monumental component—an approach widely considered as little adapted to cultural traditions in some developing countries. As a result of such a trend, cities worldwide started to include in their cultural policy—and in its international component—the many expressions of intangible cultural heritage, such as music, gastronomy, and crafts.

Second, cultural policies have been experiencing a rising participatory approach, sustained by both municipalities and cultural institutions ranging from UNESCO to neighborhood associations. This led cities to increasingly involve their local cultural actors in the definition and implementation of strategies to support the sector, preserve cultural heritage, and enhance the global positioning and the attractiveness of the city.

Moreover, international cultural actions share this updated approach by creating synergies between horizontal, city-to-city cooperation with vertical partnerships inspired by the principle of co-creation and co-ownership between the municipality, civil society organizations, the private sector, and inhabitants. By strengthening social bonds—a goal worth pursuing in itself—such strategies allow for a dynamic, shared definition of a place’s cultural identity and branding strategies aligned with local strengths, challenges, and aspirations.
Cultural City Branding

Since the 1990s, the practice of place branding has emerged in cities all over the world, strengthening the connection between the cultural and the economic dimensions of city diplomacy. This approach stems from the widely accepted assumption that “Future competition between nations, cities, and enterprises looks set to be based less on natural resources, location or past reputation and more on the ability to develop attractive images and symbols and project these effectively” (Landry and Bianchini 1995, 12). As a result, municipalities, just like companies do with their products, put in place strategies to forge external audiences’ perception of their city by linking it to appealing narratives.

In fact, the connection between a place and a specific identity is age-old and encompasses many cultures. Ancient Romans attribute it to a guardian deity, the genius loci, considered responsible for the unique qualities to a location (Jackson 1995). Nevertheless, what was mainly a concept related to residency and experience of a city’s physical space has become, in today’s city management, an intangible asset to target a foreign public. Logos and slogan used to convey such message reveal it clearly: “Joburg—A World Class African City” “Hong Kong—Asia’s World City” or “Lviv—Open to the World” all show they are mainly directed to a foreign audience.

Traditionally, residents have been little involved in branding procedures (Campelo et al. 2014). Moreover, while the purpose of city branding is clearly to assess the unique identity of a city, the spread of similar techniques and the alignment on other cities’ strategies led to campaigns little connected to the city’s specificities (Vuignier 2017).

More recently, many new campaigns show a rising accent on residents’ involvement in the definition of such “spirit of the place,” thus creating a more grounded, specific strategy allowing for coherence between internal and external perceptions of the city. Namely, these processes involve the active participation of citizens in the identification of local cultural heritage. Examples include two ongoing activities: “Community-based inventorying of intangible heritage in urban areas” (2018–2021), a project implemented by UNESCO in nine cities across the world, and the EU-funded “Part-Her” project (2019–2020), involving six intermediary cities in different European countries engaging their citizens to identify and promote what they consider local cultural heritage, in both its tangible and intangible components (UNESCO 2020a; PartHer 2020).
In terms of design and management, the cultural branding strategy is usually the result of the cooperation between the municipal departments of international relations, culture, and economic development (see below).

**A Broad Array of Available Tools**

As mentioned, this component of city diplomacy is known for its pervasiveness. As a matter of fact, cities use it to complement and strengthen political and economic partnerships at both bilateral and multilateral levels, as well as in the framework of the cooperation with the national government and international organizations. Moreover, similar cultural traits have been acting as a connector between cities: for example, the French city of Reims has signed twinning agreements with other cities featuring renowned cathedrals—i.e., Florence, Canterbury, and Aachen.

In multilateral terms, city cooperation in the fields of culture and creativity has led to the creation of a number of dedicated city networks. These networks are based on a shared approach to culture on creativity:

- The wish to promote and protect the city’s tangible heritage: Organization of World Heritage Cities (OWHC), or the Alliance of Euro-Mediterranean Cultural Cities (AVEC);
- The desire to elaborate cultural agendas in line with the city’s specificities, be them global cities (World Cities Culture Forum) or small centers below 50,000 inhabitants (Cittaslow);
- An accent on creativity and cultural traditions as a sustainable development driver: the UNESCO Creative Cities Network (see Box 8.2), the Délice Network, or the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation Cities of Ceramics (AEuCC);
- Celebration of shared cultural past: including the already mentioned International Association of Francophone Mayors (AIMF), Union of Ibero-American Capital Cities (UCCI), and the Union of Portuguese-Language Capital Cities (UCCLA).

The mentioned networks, and many more, support members cities’ cultural actions through knowledge exchange, the organization of joint cultural projects and celebrations. Moreover, membership in such
networks contributes to the city’s international branding. This leads to the extensive use by member cities of these networks’ logos.

International cultural events represent a widespread tool for cities of all sizes to jointly pursuing international and local goals. Locally, the event represents an opportunity to enhance economic development, particularly within the cultural, creative, and tourism sectors. Moreover, it is an opportunity for cities to engage in dialogue with residents and local stakeholders and empower target communities such as specific neighborhoods, minorities, or migrants (see Chapter 9). Internationally, such events allow the city to deeply enhance its visibility, thus attracting tourists and—depending on the characteristics and the scope of the event—investments, and companies from abroad. Usually, these events are tailored to complement the city’s branding strategy.

Across the world, international cultural events can be divided into recurring events—such as festivals and exhibitions—and events requiring an international bidding campaign. The most famous of the last typology of events is by far the European Capital of Culture (ECC), an EU initiative launched in 1985 by then Greek Minister of Culture Melina Mercouri and intended to celebrate culture and the arts in two European cities every year. Since 2021, the program will also open to a third city from EU candidate counties. On several occasions, European cities were able to use such an event to rebrand themselves effectively and harness substantial socioeconomic benefits. For example, 2004 ECC Lille was able to transition from years of economic stagnation due to deindustrialization to the status of international creative capital. The cooperation with local cultural and creative stakeholders, launched in the ECC framework, has fueled such a dynamics ever since, leading the city to become the 2020 World Design Capital. The World Design Capital is a biennial year-long cultural program aimed at showcasing the hosting city’s design policy. The initiative is directed by the World Design Organization, an NGO based in Montreal.

The success of ECC led to the creation of similar programs in Africa (African Capital of Culture, launched in 2020 by United Cities and Local Governments of Africa—UCLGA) and in Ibero-America (Capital Iberoamericana de la Cultura, since 1991, and the Plaza Mayor de la Cultura Iberoamericana, since 1994, both implemented by UCCI—see Box 3.2).

In terms of multilevel diplomatic action involving both city and national governments, culture, particularly its heritage component, tends
to play a central role. Many countries’ embassies, consulates, and cultural institutes abroad have a tradition of partnering up with municipalities to organize cultural activities as part of the country’s cultural diplomacy, generally aiming at improving the perception of the country abroad while fostering tourism attractivity.

Finally, international organizations have supported cultural city diplomacy to empower cities as partners in their general goals. Most notable examples include the UNESCO’s Cities platform comprising eight different initiatives (see Box 8.2 and Chapter 1) and the Council of Europe’s Intercultural Cities programme (see Chapter 9).

**The Management of an International Cultural Strategy**

Two main solutions emerge regarding the design and management of cities’ external cultural action. In some municipalities, such task pertains to the international relations office or department, as one of the components of city diplomacy. Nevertheless, it is not uncommon for cities to attribute the lead to the culture sector—a frequent choice in major European cities (Eurocities 2017). When a city has both services, it is advisable for them to cooperate and include the economic development department/agency in the whole process. In order to do that, the two services should cover different roles. The culture sector should define the contents, while the international relations department should create/join and manage partnerships at regional and global level. This cooperation reveals to be particularly useful with those cultural projects featuring an explicit political stance on a challenge shared by cities around the world, such as intercultural dialogue, migration, or protection of intangible heritage. By building international partnerships to that purpose, cities are given the possibility to define an urban approach and advocate for it internationally. This way, cultural initiatives with a strong political component—e.g., participation, democracy, inclusion—can be integrated into a broader multilateral strategy connecting cities internationally.

Finally, the economic development department/agency could complement the strategy creating coherence and synergies with the city’s economic goals, adding an accent on the opportunity to build
international cultural partnerships capable of generating economic growth and job creation.

**GOALS AND GUIDING PRINCIPLES**

The spread of these practices stems from its multiplicity of goals. Those can be divided into two groups, depending on the inward or outward nature of their guiding principles.

First, inward-oriented activities aim at using international cultural actions to impact residents and local actors positively. Namely, these include:

- Acquiring skills and techniques to protect and promote local heritage and supporting its capacity to attract tourists;
- Promoting creative industries, and enhancing their capacity to generate revenues and jobs by enhancing their international exposure;
- Enhancing social inclusion, when cultural initiatives take place in the framework of co-development (see Chapters 3 and 9).

Outward-oriented approaches tend to enhance the contribution of culture to the city’s international goals. This notably features:

- Adopting a public diplomacy perspective—-independent or in line with the national strategy. This expression of soft power recurs to local cultural assets to make the city more appealing to foreign actors, namely tourists, investors, companies, talents, and students;
- Sharing of best practices, in order to support partner cities in their culture and creativity-led development;
- Supporting cultural and creative diaspora (music, film, gastronomy, etc.), notably by involving them in bilateral events celebrating city-to-city cooperation.

Inward and outward goals are often combined. Just like the other dimensions of city diplomacy, the full potential of these activities can only be reached by establishing a two-way connection between local and international dimensions, enhanced with a participatory approach. Thus, the
municipality, residents, and local actors can cooperate at the definition and implementation of goals, learn from foreign partners’ best practices, and follow up on the project implementation while strengthening their city’s international positioning. Like other public policies, awareness and participation reveal to be vital for success.

**Box 8.1: City Modeling: from Coloniality to Co-creation**

Across the world, cities are tackling similar urban planning goals, such as historic neighborhood revitalization or regeneration of waterfronts, by deploying similar solutions. According to Carlos Vainer, such a worldwide spread of best practices in city modeling is linked to an approach to modernity stemming from Europe and North America (Vainer 2014). Hence, the spread of practices developed by Global North urbanists through colonialism, continued in the framework of development aid, with the support of national and multilateral agencies. The promotion of tangible and intangible local heritage specificities calls city leaders and urbanists outside the Western world to define an autonomous way of matching heritage with economic development. Challenges include the preservation of traditional urban tissue, which in Sub-Saharan Africa often consists of intricate networks of relatively fragile buildings made of earth and vegetation. The protection and promotion of such heritage can play an essential role in expanding tourism, while it might generate challenges of compatibility with the introduction of much-needed utility networks (electricity, water, sewers). In order to define a coherent approach respectful of local culture and society, a “decolonized” approach to urban planning appears as the only solution, to be implemented through “multiple, open dialogue” between academia, professionals and, above all citizens (ibidem). This approach appears to be compatible with the current evolution of city-to-city learning: instead of applying to a city in the South a best practice coming from a city in the North (the original fundament of decentralized cooperation), partnerships’ content is now co-designed, with the involvement of local actors on both sides. Cities appear to be committed to such a complex process requiring extensive consideration of the geographical, socioeconomic, cultural, and political differences while harnessing local creativity to innovate and answer the real needs and wishes of the population.

*Sources* Vainer (2014), Sow (2015), and Mane (2015)
Local and International Challenges

The cultural component of city diplomacy is relatively less controversial than the other ones— which explains why it is so often used to complement them. For example, when city delegations travel abroad, they are frequently accompanied by local artists such as musicians, actors, dancers, chefs, who will perform for foreign officials and audience to celebrate the bond between the cities.

Nevertheless, cultural diplomacy can raise a series of additional challenges to the preconditions listed in Chapter 1.

I. Cultural differences

Cultural displays and performances in the framework of international partnerships should always take into consideration the counterparts’ political and religious sensibilities to avoid inadvertently offend or embarrass them (e.g., nudity, topics evocative of traumas). If needed, to avoid risks of diplomatic incidents, the international relations/culture staff could consult with national diplomats or researchers in cultural and area studies specialized in the partner’s culture and protocol.

II. Balance between cooperation and competition

In the past, cities competed with each other to attract talented architects and artists—a common practice, for example, in Italian Renaissance’s Signorie, whose impact brings tourists from all over the world to cities like Florence, Verona, Ferrara or Mantova. While this form of competition still exists—and often at a much larger, global scale—the rise of city diplomacy has spread a firm commitment for city-to-city cooperation. Today, major European cities tend to qualify this component of city diplomacy as “international cultural cooperation,” a term which denotes, according to Eurocities, a “paradigm shift” (Eurocities 2017). For this shift to reach its full potential, it needs to be shared by all actors involved in this dimension of city diplomacy—municipality, tourism organizations, development agency (when present), artists, cultural and creative industries, tourism sector, cultural associations, and residents. A coherent, ambitious strategy well connected to a city’s specificities opens up to the possibility of boosting cultural and creative industries, with a positive, sustainable impact on the local economy, job market, and social equality. Moreover,
cities are keener to cooperate in the presence of balanced, clear positive externalities on both sides.

III. Balance between protection and promotion

It is not always easy to balance the protection of urban cultural heritage, in both its tangible and intangible components, and the goal of attracting tourists from across the world. Over-tourism has generated protests by residents in several touristic cities, as vast inflow of tourism might cause a number of challenges, ranging from local economy (raise of prices and rents), to the environment (more traffic and waste) and damage to fragile heritage. The World Tourism Organization, a specialized agency of the United Nations, formally recognizes the role of cities as leaders in promoting sustainable cultural tourism as a tool to implement the Agenda 2030, namely SDG 11 on sustainable cities and communities. To foster discussion and cooperation in this field, UNWTO organizes since 2012 the annual Global Summit on City Tourism, and promote multi-level cooperation between states, local governments, tourism operators, and research institutions.1

To address these issues, there is a need for the international tourism strategy to be co-constructed with the local population, stakeholders from the cultural and tourism sectors, and experts in heritage and environment studies.

IV. Balance between past and present

A challenge is represented by finding a balance between protecting and promoting ancient local heritage and doing the same with more contemporary expressions of culture, including innovation, diversity, and cross-fertilization of cultures. There is an inherent need for both goals to be coordinated in order for the municipality to plan and implement coherent local actions and to provide foreign and internal audiences with a rich, attractive cultural city brand. The spread of a participatory definition of what represents cultural heritage—a trend supported, as mentioned, by

1 Moreover, the UNWTO Award in Public Policy and Governance has been launched to celebrate practices able to match social and economic benefits with the promotion and protection of local cultural heritage (UNWTO 2020).
international organizations such as UNESCO and the EU—allows municipalities to update their inventoring and design policies taking into due consideration all components of urban culture.

V. Financial constraints

Sometimes perceived as a nonessential component of public spending, municipal cultural action, in both its local and international components, frequently suffers budgetary cuts in times of financial constraints. In terms of city diplomacy, this usually results in fewer new partnerships, while existing ones could become inactive. Cities in these situations should consider strengthening multi-stakeholder partnerships, seeking external financial and in-kind support, and cooperating with national public bodies (Ministries of Culture, Tourism, and Foreign Affairs, institutes for culture abroad, embassies and consulates), charities, and the private sector.

VI. Cultural cooperation with cities lacking freedom of expression

As mentioned in Chapter 1, dealing with cities in nondemocratic regimes can cause additional challenges to city diplomacy. This is particularly the case in the framework of cultural and creative cooperation with cities in countries imposing heavy censorship and legal constraints to freedom of expression. While cities could legitimately decide not to refrain from such international partnerships—namely in the hope that sustained cooperation could lead to opening and democratization—it is of paramount importance to make sure such cooperation is not perceived as an endorsement to nondemocratic regimes. To that purpose, it is useful to define a set of clear guidelines for all the actors involved in the partnership. This reveals to be particularly useful in the case of municipalities refraining from direct cultural cooperation but wishing to support the relationships between actors and stakeholders of the two cities’ cultural sectors, such as artists, galleries, NGOs, museums, and theaters (Eurocities 2017).

Like other forms of city diplomacy, the external cultural action of cities demands a strategic approach to support its consistency and coherence with the whole municipal international action. The presence of a plurality
of public and private actors might entail unclear and redundant international exposure. This calls for closer coordination and strategic planning to maximize both the return on investment and the positive impact on the whole local community.

The Impact of COVID-19 on Cities’ Cultural Diplomacy

Finally, in cities across the world, cultural and creative sectors have been harshly hit by the COVID-19 pandemic. Lockdown and social distancing measures forced most performing artists to stop working, and cultural venues such as museums, galleries, theaters, and concert halls to close. Given the global nature of this impact, cities started to exchange views and best practices on how to deal with the immediate challenges, and those likely to emerge in the mid to long term. As mentioned in Chapter 5, the pandemic will dramatically reduce municipalities’ capacity to step in and financially support these sectors, as several cities have done in the first weeks of the outbreak (OECD 2020). For that reason, new modalities to allow for cultural and creative industries to be sustainable have been an object of debates within city networks such as the UNESCO Creative Cities Network, the Organization of World Heritage Cities, and Intercultural Cities. If a strategy is yet to be found, cities have been particularly cooperating on the transition cultural and creative sectors to the Internet, namely by creating municipal online platforms. An example is represented by Bogotá Creadora en Casa (Bogotá Creative at Home), a portal providing visibility to new and past creations by the city’s artists (and students), as well as to the cultural heritage of the city. The platform is integrated into a triangular cooperation with similar platforms by the cities of Barcelona and Buenos Aires, in the framework of the Ciudad(es) Cultura (Culture Cities) project.

Box 8.2: UNESCO Creative Cities Network

The UNESCO Creative Cities Network is a clear example of the cooperation potential between international organizations and cities. UNESCO created the network in 2004 to “strengthen cooperation with
and among cities that have recognized creativity as a strategic factor of sustainable development”.

The network’s 246 members are divided into seven subnetworks: Crafts and Folk Arts, Media Arts, Film, Design, Gastronomy, Literature, and Music. Even if cities are entitled to join only one subnetwork and concentrate their activities on that specific sector, all members are invited to exchange and cooperate with each other.

It is worth mentioning that a cities’ subnetwork not necessarily represent the main creative sector of the city in terms of revenue or employment, as demonstrated by Milan, a world’s capital in industrial and fashion design and a member of the literature subnetwork since 2017.

Member cities systematically invite each other to their cultural initiatives, which provide the opportunity for city managers to meet and further expand cooperation. An example was the 2017 GolaGola Festival held in Parma, when chefs representing the hosting cities and six other cities from the Gastronomy subnetwork realized a series of cooking shows and a charity gala dinner. Cooperation fostered in this framework led the five participating European cities present to obtain a European grant to support knowledge about the food value chain for younger generations (“Youth in action for a creative and sustainable gastronomy” project, 2017, 2019).

Finally, participation in this network provides cities with a much coveted brand of a world-class creative city, whose activities enjoy the visibility support by UNESCO and other member cities.

Sources Bax (2016), European Commission (2019), and UNESCO (2020b)

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