



culture 21

UCLG Committee

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THE GREAT SHUTDOWN – WHAT WILL THE ARTS DO TO BRING CITIES BACK TO LIFE?

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All around the world urban life is eerily quiet, as citizens are required to be as timorous as mice – only venturing out if safe or necessary. Cities have faced plagues of infection before and their history is full of stories of their temporary turmoil and subsequent recovery. The word temporary is elastic, though, and recovery can take time; and life after is not quite the same as it was. These assaults have often been vicious and concentrated in their deadliness, killing between a quarter and half of inhabitants within a season. Bubonic plague hit the cities of Europe between the 14th and 18th centuries on average three times per century. Except for the first time, in the disastrous 1340s, when Kings still made time for continental war and entire communities were wiped out for ever, recovery from dire social trauma was remarkably swift.

The COVID-19 pandemic is very different, even if it does not feel like it when people are stranded, dying and afraid. On the bad side, it has spread around the world more quickly than usual and its economic damage has been almost instantaneous and global, reducing normal activity to a skeleton within six weeks. By edict cities

have become private indoor spaces, not garrulous communal places for gathering and exchange.

Awful as this seems, those enduring the shutdown have advantages our predecessors could never have imagined: direct home electricity and gas, so no need to seek fuel; one-stop supermarkets (even if not as full of stock as normal) so less need to roam the streets looking for food; radio, TV and the internet to maintain connection and enable many to work from home – and a massive world-wide library of audio-visual arts and entertainment. All of this makes it more bearable to live in seclusion and helps the infection dwindle after its initial onslaught. All the efforts arts organisations are making to distribute and perform online, like the Global Lockdown Orchestra, are helping people endure.

Cities were not built as dormitories, however, and bare streets with closed cafés and shuttered shops are dismal places, even if the architecture can be seen with the eyes of the original draughtsmen. Venice has ducks and fish back in its canals, the cats have the freedom of the ancient Roman Forum without tourists, the view down

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Barcelona's Ramblas is clear to the sea – but the grand avenues and monuments of Paris are pointless with no-one to admire them, Vienna is not very interesting when the musicians are only practising in their apartments.

The legends associated with Demeter and Persephone are suddenly relevant again – the sense that life is on hold, waiting for something that could be called Spring, even if in this case it is society's Spring we have to hibernate until, not nature's. Cities will reawaken and when they do the arts and the rest of the cultural sector (however it is defined) will need to be the agents of revival.

It will be important to open theatres, concert halls and other performance spaces as soon as it is safe to do so – not necessarily with the preplanned season but with whatever shows give audiences the greatest sense that their life is no longer in abeyance. This does not mean that performances need be shallow or frivolous; indeed the public may appreciate a level of seriousness that reflects the trauma they have faced – great works for difficult times. Over the centuries it has been a reasonably reliable axiom that the most enduring works have emerged from periods of the deepest social and political disruption.

The same is true of festivals. They have always been used to celebrate or commemorate moments of community significance, whether it be the change of seasons or religious anniversaries. The modern arts and music festivals are mainly twentieth century inventions but the purpose has not really changed. Many of

the great ones, like Lucerne or Edinburgh, started as a response to political turmoil or the need to provide a sense of renewed energy and hope after the scars, physical and psychological, of war. More recently festivals, like the Sarajevo Winter Festival, were hugely important in the Balkans for keeping up morale in the worst of times – or raising it in the countries impoverished by the mishandled transformation from authoritarian communism. In the decade from 1995 festivals were crucial in preparing cities like Bucharest and Warsaw for open European life.

They will have the same purpose everywhere after the pandemic subsides. Either this summer, autumn or as soon as the weather allows in 2021, festivals (like sporting life) will be essential markers of re-engagement. The statement recently from the International Olympic Committee put it well. "The Olympic Games in Tokyo could stand as a beacon of hope to the world during these troubled times and the Olympic flame could become the light at the end of the tunnel in which the world finds itself at present."

Re-energizing towns and cities will take energy but it will also take money. Governments must not turn the taps off relief measures the moment café and theatre doors open wide again. Even though online streaming and newsletters will have kept arts organisations juddering along, it will take a huge effort to contact audiences, start up booking systems, find staff who may have had to move on, and get venues operational.

There is a sense too that the aim should not be just to return cities to how they

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were before. Instead policy makers should take the opportunity of this enforced quiet to think again about how they want the next cultural phase of this century to look. Just as in the 1946-50 years there was a hugely inventive process for starting institutions and changing society, doing away with domestic servants and building social housing along with open arts venues, so 2020 should be the year we start to think afresh about our cultural aims and ambitions. UCLG's Agenda 21 for Culture could turn out to be even more important, if a little different, from how it was envisaged even five years ago.

Culture Action Europe, an organisation I was instrumental in founding in 1991, put it well when responding to this virus crisis. "Are we ready to take actions to tackle climate change together and to recognise culture's role in fair development? Will we be ready to address social inequalities and put solidarity above the immediate economic gains? Instead of going back to business as usual, will the governments pluck up the courage to implement drastic systemic changes? If we manage to do it, we will come out of this crisis more united, stronger human beings sharing a sustainable project."

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VIEWS EXPRESSED IN THIS ARTICLE.

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