

Valletta 2018: Wa

Now that 2018 has ended, the inevitable question is: Was Valletta 2018 successful as a European Capital of Culture? There is no easy reply to this question. To arrive to some kind of reply, an understanding of the background and context is needed.

JOHN EBEJER writes

ECoC – A European experience

European Capital of Culture (ECoC) started in 1985. Up to last year, there were 58 cities or city-regions across Europe that have held the title including Valletta and Leeuwarden, the Netherlands in 2018. The initiative has become one of the most prestigious and high profile cultural events in Europe. There is stiff competition between cities to be awarded the title. For example, when Liverpool won the 2008 title, there were 12 bids from cities in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Some might think that ECOC is merely a series of cultural activities that are held in a city during a particular year. ECOC is much more than that as reflected in the reasons and objectives that motivate cities to bid for the title. Often, ECOC is one of various urban policy tools used by cities to regenerate themselves. Urban renewal is achieved not only by implementing capital projects but also by breathing new life into a city's culture and by boosting tourism. ECOC is a means for raising the international profile of a city, in the context of stiff competition between cities. The more dynamic cities implement strategies to strengthen their attractiveness and hence their competitiveness. Cities that are complacent risk losing out and become less renowned when compared to the more dynamic neighbouring cities. ECOC is also supported by the European Commission. The EC sees it as a celebration of culture and a means for highlighting the richness and diversity of cultures across Europe.

To better evaluate Valletta 2018, it is useful to consider one successful example. The northern French city of Lille hosted ECOC in 2004. It included the whole metropolitan area of Lille that included 193 towns. One of its main objectives was to promote social cohesion and enhance the pride and self-confidence of residents. The emphasis of the programming was on having a large number of disseminated events targeting particular audiences and involving as many cultural producers as possible. Twelve new poles for cultural activities, the Maisons Folie, were opened through suitable re-conversion of former industrial buildings. These were located across the entire metropolitan area and were intended to create a web of creative-friendly environments for artists and residents.

The total ECOC budget was around €74 million, 17 per cent of which was from corporate sponsors. There was a separate budget of €19 million for historic building restoration and a further €70 million budget for capital projects. The investments brought about a rejuvenation of the city by means of a restored opera house, two brand new cultural facilities and the restoration of several historic churches and monuments. The various events were attended by nine million visitors, and this included 2.8 million tickets sold. Special tariffs were offered to favour the attendance of residents and other classes of visitors.

More than 1200 schools were involved in the programme, with 900 special events targeting very young audiences. More

than 350 small businesses actively cooperated by introducing permanent info points, special openings, and thematic furnishings of shop-windows and so on. Audio-visual reportages from national and foreign televisions exceeded 2,000. There were an estimated 8,000 articles in the regional, national and international press. One hundred and forty official foreign delegations, from 30 different countries, visited Lille 2004.

Malta's image as a culture tourism destination

Apart from cultural infrastructural and events, the growth of cultural tourism relies on the development of a strong international cultural image. People with an interest in culture are more likely to visit destinations that are renowned for their cultural offer. Since 2000, it has been the government's declared policy to use Malta's unusually rich heritage to increase the number of culture tourists to Malta. The relevance therefore of Valletta 2018 (V18) to Malta's tourism policy is significant. The event provided a golden opportunity to enhance Malta's credentials as a culture destination.

Destination image is dependent on many factors. The mere fact of hosting ECOC has affected to some extent international perceptions of Valletta and of Malta. This was reinforced over the years by the Malta Tourism Authority with various international marketing initiatives using V18 as a focus. Malta has a reasonably strong cultural infrastructure and this was strengthened with the opening of a new purpose designed art gallery, MUZA (*Mużew Nazjonalni tal-Arti*). It is a pity however, that MUZA was completed and opened to the public at the end of 2018.

Marketing and promotion is one of many factors that shape potential tourists' perceptions of Malta. Apart from MTA's normal budget, how much was spent on promoting Valletta 2018 (and Malta) overseas? This is an important question in the light of Malta's international image and of government policy to promote more cultural tourism. The advertising space in Air Malta's in-flight magazine gave an indication of V18's commitment to international promotion. This year I flew Air Malta in March and in November, and on both occasions was dismayed to see virtually no promotion of V18 in the in-flight magazine, almost as if it was not happening. A significant number of incoming tourists use Air Malta so the in-flight magazine



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would have been a good way of telling them that Malta is a great cultural destination and to encourage them to attend the ECOC activities. One would have expected V18 to be jumping out of the pages but the V18 Foundation thought otherwise.

The image of Valletta 2018 was greatly tarnished because of highly controversial comments made by its Chairman. An event such as ECOC is a powerful tool for cultural diplomacy, if internal and external stakeholders are handled appropriately. The Chairman's controversial comments on a highly sensitive subject antagonised sections of the Maltese public, including the local cultural community who called for his resignation. His controversial comments were also noted by V18's international partners, not least because they were divisive and therefore go against the very spirit of ECOC of inclusiveness. The situation got so bad that Leeuwarden, the other 2018 ECOC, chose to boycott the Malta events, in spite of the Minister of Culture's efforts to heal the rift. Moreover, Ulrich Fuchs, an ECOC veteran and member of the Monitoring and Advisory Panel, denounced Valletta 2018 and any related event after hearing of the comments of the V18 Chairman. He decided not to attend any event held by the Valletta

2018 "as long as people who are representing the project destroy European values". Significantly, V18 was also boycotted by the Valletta mayor.

My own experience confirm the negative vibes that Valletta 2018 had unwittingly created. I was involved in the organisation of an international conference on historic towns. One would have expected the organisers to shout it out loud that the event is being organised in Valletta during Valletta 2018. Instead, they chose to barely mention it in their promotional material, as if they did not want their conference to be associated with V18.

Cultural vibrancy

Various comments on Valletta 2018 by several cultural operators were reported in the print media. On the plus side, the programme was diverse with as many as 400 events. Several Maltese artists had the opportunity to collaborate and gain experience on large international projects. On the minus side, the artistic programme lacked consistency, in part because there was no single artistic director or team. Prof. Vicki Ann Cremona, chair of the School of Performing Arts at the University of Malta, argued that a key element of the Bid Book was ignored namely: the concept of 'Euro-

Was it successful?



peanness' and what it means to belong to Europe.

The Bid Book is the application on which Valletta was selected ECoC. It is a commitment of what is to be done and achieved during the ECoC year. This notwithstanding the cultural and artistic objectives as stated in the Bid Book were largely ignored. Toni Attard, former strategy director at Arts Council Malta, noted a significant difference between the Bid Book intentions and the eventual programme. The intention was for a more artist-led approach, with various projects originating from the artistic communities, rather than conceived and controlled by a central government agency. Mr Attard noted that some survived the cull and made their way to the final programme, but they ended up largely as marginal events.

Valletta 2018 acted largely as a funding agency giving out funds in accordance to requests made. Cultural operators were invited to come forward with ideas for cultural initiatives. This provided them the opportunity to experiment and move out of their comfort zone, as the commercial risks were minimised. The end result was a rich programme of events for the ECoC, even if many events were already part of



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Malta's cultural programme. The number of new events, especially innovative ones, is not as much as one would have hoped for.

Regenerating Valletta

Some people claim that Valletta 2018 was instrumental in the regeneration of Val-

letta. I contend that this assertion is largely incorrect and I will explain why. The regeneration of an urban area is a process that spans many years, even decades. Valletta's process of regeneration has been ongoing since the nineties and was accelerated with a series of projects that started in 2005. The main ones were the pedestrianisation of Merchants Street and Pjazza San Gorg; the restoration and reuse of Fort St Elmo; the Fortifications Interactive Centre; restoration of Valletta's more important buildings and the City Gate project. As these various projects gained momentum, it became clear that Valletta will no longer be ignored by the authorities and that the air of dereliction would be greatly reduced. The private sector understood that Valletta offered new opportunities for investment. Many historic houses and palazzos were restored for use as residences or offices. Preparations for ECoC 2018 began soon after 2010. This was a catalyst for further private investment in Valletta particularly in catering establishments and boutique hotels.

Public and private sector investments were instrumental in giving new life to Valletta in the evenings. In recent years, the V18 Foundation gave priority to this and actively encouraged investments in commercial establishments in Strait Street and adjoining streets. There are some who argue that evening leisure in Valletta is now excessive because of inconveniences caused to residents. Another persistent problem is the take up of pedestrian spaces for table and chairs, often with unsightly canopies incompatible with the historic context.

Some commentators confuse a revitalised evening activity with urban regeneration. For a historic area, urban regeneration is mainly about investments in the renewal of the urban fabric and bringing disused properties into use. It is also about generating vitality in urban spaces throughout the day and evening. Evening leisure activity is one small part of a much wider renewal process. The claim made by the Culture Minister that Valletta 2018's legacy is "the rebirth of the capital city" is blatantly untrue. I say this as someone who has been a close observer of Valletta since 2000 and before.

ECoC Governance

On governance, a number of serious errors were committed along the way. The first mistake was appointing someone as Chairman of V18 with no knowledge and understanding of the cultural sector, nor of issues related to tourism. The appointed chairman also knew nothing about European Capital of Culture, and more crucially about its values. He was unable therefore to understand why his Facebook comments back in March were so controversial and so inappropriate for the V18 Chairman to make. Another mistake was the replacement of two key officials from the V18 management just a few months before the start of Valletta ECoC year. These officials were widely seen to be doing a good job so their removal was inexplicable. Years of know-how and experience were lost. These dismissals raised questions on the ethical implications and on the suspect strategic choice of replacing such key posts at the eleventh hour.

Lost opportunities

In the run up to V18 there were a number of opportunities that were there for the taking. They could have been used to further promote Valletta 2018 and concurrently raise the international profile of Valletta and Malta. The synergies created

could have been beneficial to the culture sector but the opportunities were lost.

The City Gate project, for example, has the potential to generate significant international interest. It is iconic architecture designed by world-renowned architect Renzo Piano at the entrance of a historic fortified city designated as a World Heritage Site. Irrespective of past controversies, the new Parliament building, City Gate and Pjazza Teatru Rjal could have been promoted as buildings and urban spaces to be proud of, something that the authorities and the V18 Foundation were reluctant to do.

In 2016, there was the 450th anniversary of Valletta. This was a golden opportunity to organise events to highlight the historical-European significance of Valletta to an international audience. The 450th anniversary of Valletta passed by with barely a whimper. There was also Malta's EU presidency in the first half of 2017, another significant moment that could have been better used to get potential tourists more interested in Malta's cultural offer.

Reactions from an interested stakeholder

Valletta Alive Foundation (VAF) is an NGO that took an active interest in Valletta 2018 from its beginnings when Valletta declared its intention to bid for European Capital of Culture back in 2010. VAF closely followed progress of V18, largely through the media but also through meetings it had with key players and other stakeholders. In the beginning, the VAF was enthusiastic about ECoC and fully supported it. This was until 2014/15 when VAF sensed a shift in the V18 Foundation's approach. Mixed messages were being sent out. V18 officials were encouraging active participation by civil society, including VAF, while V18 Chairman took a negative stance against VAF, and presumably against other interested stakeholders. VAF's initial enthusiasm turned into concern and apprehension. V18 Foundation was giving far too much priority to generating commercial activity in Valletta and very little importance to cultural and social objectives. Today VAF is greatly disappointed that this unique opportunity for Valletta has turned out very different to what was originally intended. Even if there were some achievements and benefits, so much more could have been achieved.

Conclusion

During 2018, I attended various cultural events. In each case there was no mention of Valletta 2018, other than sometimes being mentioned as a sponsor. For Valletta 2018, one would have expected a sense of celebration of Malta and Maltese culture. This sense of celebration was totally absent.

Coming back to the original question: was Valletta 2018 successful? I would argue that it was not. There may have been benefits in terms of culture and tourism promotion, but these were benefits that could have been easily achieved by an increase in financial allocations. European Capital of Culture is a brand name that provided innumerable opportunities for culture, for cultural tourism and for the enhancement of Malta image as a cultural destination. For various reasons, these opportunities were squandered and for this reason Valletta 2018 should be considered a failure.

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