

# Urban renaissance: from physical beautification to social empowerment

## Lessons from Bruges—Cultural Capital of Europe 2002

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*Will culture increasingly become a constellation of highly profitable niche markets, only accessible to the better-off middle class? And will it therefore join the movement of market fundamentalism that, in many Western societies, has abandoned social housing, emancipatory education and public space for the exclusive game of high profitability investments and upper-class ideology-formation, in which the beautification of run-down urban neighbourhoods plays a leading role? Or are we witnessing a revival of popular culture that will contribute to the integration of excluded groups within the social fabric?*

*This special feature examines these questions, always central ones for City, and explains how strategies to democratize culture offer solutions for the paradoxes (insurmountable contradictions, as the capitalist class would argue) of the workfare state and urban renewal policies.*

*The feature flows from an event organized in Bruges as a challenge and a critique to the city's year as 'Cultural Capital of Europe' and includes contributions from artists, local historians and activists, a schoolteacher and scholars from the universities. The diversity of voices is intentional.*

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Humanist philosophy, the welfare state and culture

**I**n the early 16th century the Spanish humanist Juan-Luis Vives (1492–1540) lived and worked in Bruges. He was particularly interested in the problems of urban poverty and its relief, and examined how public social policy and the Christian principle of charity could be reconciled. He strongly supported the integration of the poor into the urban community by offering them education

and employment opportunities. *Was Vives a supporter of the 'The Active Welfare' state before his time?*

Today the meaning of Vives' work is in the first place symbolic: Vives as an intellectual and ethical milestone in a city that, since the 13th century, long before Vives' arrival, already pioneered a Poor relief policy; at the time of Vives, under the pressure of economic crisis and a surge of war refugees, questions about integration of non-citizens into the city's poverty relief programmes and the relationship between

welfare, education and workfare were highly relevant within religious, economic and political circles (Geremek, 1997). We believe that this historic debate is highly relevant in a contemporary context and can be a source of inspiration for addressing urban exclusion today.

In this perspective, the 'Vives conferences' in the Spring of 2002 as part of the programme of Bruges Cultural Capital of Europe,<sup>1</sup> focused on the link between urban development, culture, arts and poverty relief. In these conferences, 'arts and culture' are not just considered as an expensive luxury for the wealthy, but also as a creative activity of the common people and economically deprived citizens. Since the beginning of the 1990s this broader view has been promoted in European cities, stressing arts as a means of communication between various groups in urban society. Over the last decade, deprived neighbourhoods have harboured artistic projects meant to encourage co-operation between their inhabitants and to reconstruct local community identity stepwise.

In this introduction to the special feature we dwell on the various views and roles of culture and arts in social and urban development. We argue that traditional views of urban development and mainstream culture must be transcended to allow for a multi-dimensional strategy to break through social exclusion mechanisms and create routes to social integration within cities and their neighbourhoods. To this end, it is necessary to understand the various roles of culture in urban social and economic life, and to decide which ones will foster the emancipation of groups of deprived citizens and their neighbourhoods.

### **The traditional role of culture in urban development**

The traditional role of culture in urban development refers to Culture with capital C, culture promoted and led by the dominant elites: grand projects such as the

Hausmannian avenues in Paris, the Rome of the Renaissance Popes, or the contemporary Waterfront developments, post-modern shopping centres as architectural hypes, temples of culture such as the Guggenheim museums, museum parks as in Rotterdam and Berlin, the music halls in larger (London, Paris) and smaller (Bruges, Seville) cities—see, for example, Van Aalst (1997) and Werquin (1999).

The impact of these massive cultural (infra)structures and the festivals and events they support remains hard to evaluate with precision. They are definitely instrumental, not only to the beautification and economic revival of cities, but also to their identity-building or rediscovery of urban life. Actually, when the decisions to undertake such large-scale projects are supported by a significant majority of the urban population, this will contribute to the identity building of the 'democratic' city as a whole. Democratic participation will improve the quality of the local socio-political life and, therefore, of the urban identity-building process; this can be the case when neighbourhood constituencies are actively involved in the planning and decision-making processes about the location, design and actual construction of cultural infrastructures in their 'territory' (Moulaert *et al.*, 2003).

The literature generally stresses the positive effects of large-scale architectural projects on local employment and economy. But these effects are often exaggerated, unless the physical structures created host sustainable cultural activities that are territorially defined and mentally located at the level of urban society as a whole.

From this point of view, we can observe a growing tendency to implant new cultural and artistic infrastructure and activities (Moulaert *et al.*, 2003). 'Culture temples' or 'cultural infrastructures' are well situated from this point of view: hosting artistic companies (orchestra, theatre groups) or attractive collections for exhibitions is often an asset for sustainable socio-economic programming, with lasting direct and indirect

employment effects in the city (Van Aalst, 1997; Werquin, 1999). Yet cultural initiatives that are linked to particular communities seem to be more socially, economically and artistically successful than Culture Temples, on the condition that they seek to support an existing identity or build a new distinctiveness that will carry the neighbourhood community towards the future (Stern, 2001). This shift in focus away from mainstream architectural projects, to initiatives that connect to a particular spatial context leads us to a wider-ranging reflection on the role of culture in urban (neighbourhood) development.

### A socially rooted view of arts and culture in the city

There is a dangerously mechanical link between urban development and the use of artistic and architectural creations to beautify and restore cities and neighbourhoods. Two limited conceptions have merged into a limited view of urban development: a physical(ist) view of development (under-evaluating the importance of interaction with the urban communities) and a purely material view of culture and arts (under-playing the existential and communicative role(s) of culture), merging into the view that physical achievements—including art works—are the main if not the only basis of city and neighbourhood development. This eclectic view is challenged in this collection of papers and replaced by a socially rooted outlook on the multi-dimensional role of culture in urban development.

A socially rooted perspective on arts and culture sheds a multi-dimensional light on their role in urban development and their benefits for people in popular neighbourhoods. The following dimensions of arts and culture in the city are relevant in this respect:

- *Communication* as the getting-together of people who in their daily life criss-cross

each other in anonymous ways or who, because of financial and health problems, avoid other human beings, including their peers . . . Communication can be promoted by explicit artistic projects (film, theatre) but also by creating meeting places where artists portray a concrete neighbourhood problem in a plastic way, thus not forcing participants to express themselves exclusively in a verbal way.

- *Culture as expression of critique, dissatisfaction and existential crisis.* Culture is to be understood here as a 'voice' for deprived populations, communicating despair but also calling for consideration and respect. The—often spontaneous—development of specific infrastructures for alternative music, theatre or other artistic activities within deprived neighbourhoods shows this need for expressing contestation and a desire for change.
- *Medium for participation—planning tool:* this role of neighbourhood culture can be considered as an extension of the previous. Where arts and contemporary anthropology meet each other, human beings of all ages express their views of neighbourhood and quarters in writing, drawings, artistic cartography, visionary poetry or music, . . . In Latin America plastic art forms are used to let inhabitants express their visions of neighbourhood and city; in this way city planners open up planning procedures to the voice of social groups with little access to the mainstream participation channels—compare with Hillier (1999) who explains the cultural dimensions of communication in the planning process.
- *The relationship between individual and collective expression.* Of great significance in communication and in decision-making about people's 'own' future, is that individual perceptions and experiences are shared. Individual expressions of lived experiences, alienation, fear and hope should be tested against each other. That a majority or a large group of citizens manage to articulate their view of the urban world, using

various media, does not mean that a collective view of the future of the city or the neighbourhood will be produced. Uneven access to media and communication skills, implicit reference to different identities and symbols, mean a real challenge to communication and decision-making. The easy way out, often applied in practice, is that the dominant and most 'natural' approach is put forward. To avoid this mainstreaming of dominant cultural practice, more collective efforts for multi-dimensional communication should be made. At the neighbourhood level, for example, a neighbourhood committee can organize an exchange fair presenting 'individual neighbourhood maps' or 'street visions'—*clarifying what happens to my street?* These personal and micro-collective expressions should be confronted and shared; artistic forms can help translate particular visions into a politically manageable package.

- *Neighbourhood revitalization and artistic expression of identity.* This is probably the most 'classic' form of 'soft' artistic expression within a neighbourhood and the closest to 'straight' art: a sculpture, an artful building, a mural painting in a street, a park or a square. Even this application of art can play a catalysing role in identity building within a neighbourhood: its mainstream status can be a binding factor.
- *Economy and employment.* Culture and arts are quite often economic activities. Something is created that is sold via the market, acquired by the state or a civil society association, exchanged in kind or kept in the community. This is often also the case for popular culture and arts. Popular arts and culture are fully fledged activities with a potential place in a neighbourhood development plan and social economy. A dance school, a theatre company, an experimental dance group or a film project . . . But also the wider cultural practices are eligible as socio-economic activities: popular education, artistic training, adult education, professional training

for traditional artisans (stone cutters, restoration masons, carpenters). Many artisan professions that are under threat of extinction should be reconsidered from the point of view of their importance for society and community life.

### The contributions in this special feature

This special feature of *City* publishes a selection of presentations made at the Vives conferences. This selection focuses on three lead themes of the Vives programme: (1) to make urban neighbourhood redevelopment successful, strategies and policies should bypass the systematic stigmatization of urban life and ought to support actively strategies of integrated development, based on social innovation shared by a majority of the neighbourhood population; (2) contemporary social welfare policy in Western cities has roots in the Middle ages and the Renaissance, and seems to carry the same ambiguities with it as a historical ballast; (3) culture will play a positive role as a mode of communication, as a creator of social identity and as a socio-economic 'sector of activities' in urban and neighbourhood redevelopment, on condition that it is socially embedded. The links between culture and development can be understood only if the various aspects of culture(s) and their interactions are considered.

In the remainder of this introduction, we briefly elaborate on each of these themes as they are developed by the authors.

#### *From stigmatizing the urban to social innovation*

Guy Baeten warns against a stigmatization of the (urban) poor and 'their' neighbourhoods. Poverty is too easily connected to the concentration of minorities in particular neighbourhoods which have become the focus of social policy research and action; with the decentralization of poverty relief policy, this stigmatization adopts an even more out-

spoken spatial character, and reinforces the social construction of excluded population groups. This view of urban life is not only incredibly biased, it also blacklists potential social innovators as marginal and therefore not relevant to future redevelopment initiatives.

The next two contributions bypass the stigmatized depiction of urban life and compartmentalized neighbourhood development strategies. In tune with previous work (Moulaert *et al.*, 2002), the authors defend an *Integrated Area* approach to urban neighbourhood *Development*, with social innovation as the integrating device. According to IAD, social innovation is rooted in an intimate dialectic between the satisfaction of human needs—social innovation in the ‘social economy’ meaning of the term—and innovation in social relations of governance involving all social groups (Moulaert *et al.*, 2002).

Arantxa Rodríguez contextualizes poverty from a gender perspective and dwells on strategies to cope with genderized poverty and exclusion at the neighbourhood and local levels. To this end, she provides examples of socially innovative initiatives to cope with a particular dimension of gender inequality and exclusion in cities: the organization of time. Policies fostering this reorganization would empower economically fragile women to better control their own lives, but also to take on a more innovative role in rebuilding urban social life.

Jacques Nussbaumer, Frank Moulaert and Arantxa Rodríguez defend a multi-dimensional view of neighbourhood development, in which arts and architecture play a role along with socio-cultural, economic, political, ecological, etc. initiatives. Their view of neighbourhood redevelopment pinpoints social innovation, stressing innovation in social relations, as the heart of neighbourhood and community development, in which the rediscovery of equity—including gender and ethnic equity—is a key element. In this way they pave the way for a culturally creative attack on mainstream social integration and poverty relief strategies. They also

emphasize the role of the various aspects (social, economic, existential) of human life for a socially ‘sustainable’ development.

*The ‘ancient’ history of the active urban welfare state*

Both Gilbert Tournoy and Fons Dewitte write on poverty relief debates, conflicts and policies in medieval and renaissance Bruges and Europe. They manifestly shed a historical light on contemporary debates regarding poverty relief: Should society educate or nourish the poor? How ‘active’ should the social welfare system be—in the sense of ‘activating the poor’ or making them work? And which institutions are the most appropriate to co-ordinate social welfare: State, Church, charities? The actors may be different today, but the tensions between state and civil society, solidarity and exploitation of labour, employment and relief were as relevant in the medieval as they are in the contemporary city. Instead of a ‘back to the future’, when observing the construction of urban social policy today, we are left with a feeling of ‘ahead to the past’. The contradiction today between ‘relieving the needy’ from their worst hardships, on the one hand, and pushing them towards integration into a non-creative labour market managed by hierarchical control systems, on the other hand, is remarkably similar to the contradiction at the time of Vives and the *bogarden*—the pioneering city schools for educating the poor. How far should the poor become educated to reintegrate in the regular labour system? Should they just become smart enough to get employed in menial service labour—today—or as dayworkers in spinning and weaving—in the 16th century? Or should a more creative approach be promoted—rediscovering the real meaning of culture and arts in all layers of society: letting poor pupils become writers, teachers and bishops as happened to the brightest in the *bogarden* in the 16th century—and as can happen now by empowering vulnerable

groups to play a greater role in educational and socio-cultural initiatives.

*Culture as an emancipatory and society-building relation*

The possible way out from these poverty relief dilemmas may go through self-emancipation, and empowerment based on culture as a mode of communication and decision-making.

The five final articles address the various potential contributions of culture and arts towards the integration of specific population and neighbourhood communities into the urban fabric.

Els Dietvorst, Huw Thomas, Dominique Puype, Marijke Leye and Ivo Janssens stress complementary dimensions of culture and arts within neighbourhood and community development. For these authors, culture and communication are inseparable twins; culture is the ensemble of channels of creative communication between individuals and groups. Culture in its various expressive forms can feed the empowerment of people and citizens, leading them to (re)discover their identity and the strength of interaction with peers. But culture is socially rooted; culture should not be dialectically *related to* society, *it is the stream on which society moves ahead, or the riverbed in which it dries up.*

Socio-culturally embedded arts are part and parcel of a multi-dimensional, socially innovative approach to city and neighbourhood development. This does not mean that self-standing artworks should be excluded; they are part of the picture: a statue (of a local hero?) crafted by local artists to reinforce a neighbourhood's identity, the integration of a park with graffiti walls or recycling arts within living quarters, the design of a local pedestrian track, a movie rooted in the local existential reality such as 'The Return of The Swallows' . . . all contribute to the beautification of the neighbourhood, but are also expressions of local Imagineering and iden-

tity. Maybe the term beautification should be avoided in this context: it has been burnt by its strong connotation of socially destructive gentrification, including the destruction of poor quarters, the dislocation of poor people, the polarization between chic and outskirts neighbourhoods. For our purpose, an alternative to beautification could be 'refreshing' in its variety of meanings: vitalizing, inspirational, innovative and empowering. Popular speech in many languages refers to refreshing ideas or behaviour, and reacts to bourgeois or upper-class norms of 'beauty' that often have a disciplinary meaning—a denial of those population groups and their values, which do not conform to these norms. Culture as 'refreshing' comes much closer to its anthropological meaning: culture as mode of communication, as a ground for rediscovering social identity, as day-to-day activity in community-building, as creativity of local artists; by themselves or in co-operation with neighbourhood communities or social groups within the city. *Culture is rediscovered as popular culture, democratically decided and created.*

The come-back of popular culture should also be situated in the progress that has been made in the analysis of the crisis that has existed in Western society for the last few decades. Gradually, this crisis which was originally only perceived and analysed as an economic and employment crisis, is now also understood as a societal and cultural crisis, according to insights that are no longer exclusively economic, but today also sociological and anthropological. The post-modern reaction to the modernist society dominated by large-scale corporations, bureaucracies and mega-projects is also a social correction to the exaggerated influence of the monopolist market economy.<sup>2</sup> For the city this reaction means that each neighbourhood is a potential breeding ground for popular arts and culture. It also means that the distinction between *a priori ugliness* and *a posteriori beauty* of the city becomes blurred, and that social creativity is rediscovered as the main change vector of the urban fabric.

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## Notes

- 1 Hugo De Greef was the general 'intendent' of Bruges Culture Capital of Europe 2002. Frank Moulaert was the curator of the J.L. Vives conferences organized at the 'Grand Séminaire' and the 'Collège d'Europe'.
- 2 At the same time, the post-modern movement in arts, education, etc. has fostered a mushrooming of sometimes highly profitable niche markets. To a certain extent, post-modernity reflects the socio-cultural counterpart of the return to a more competitive and decentralized market economy.

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See p. 257 for notes on Frank Moulaert and Jaques Nussbaumer. Hilde Demuynck works as a training staff member in the adult education 'volkshogeschool' in Bruges. E-mail: [hilde.demuynck@vormingplus.be](mailto:hilde.demuynck@vormingplus.be)

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# Inner-city misery

## Real and imagined

Guy Baeten

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*The geography of urban deprivation is both real and 'imagined'. The combination leads to biased and often quite polarized views of cities, their dynamics and their future. Unfortunately the tendency is to depict poverty and deprivation as ugly, as an 'improper' part of urban life which should be eradicated and replaced by 'proper' middle-class physical constructions and social structures. But research which avoids the 'imagining' shows that this is an unacceptable view of the inner city where in fact people, despite their poverty, set up a wide array of social, cultural and economic networks of real meaning, which enable them to enter the labour market, to develop mutual support and to participate in cultural activities of all kinds, just like anybody else.*

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