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## BARCELONA'S CIUTAT OBERTA: cultural policy's new role in addressing global challenges

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The cultural policy of Barcelona City Council appears to be changing course. While Ada Colau's government has struggled to formulate a cultural policy strategy in line with Barcelona en Comú's commons paradigm, there are signs that it is installing a cultural rights policy framework that prioritises social equality and cohesion over economic development. A driving force behind the concretisation of this framework has been the new commissioner of culture, Joan Subirats, who took office in January 2018. With the next municipal elections scheduled for May 2019, Subirats's time in office may be as short. Yet, he has set high goals for himself and the city council's Culture Institute (ICUB). As he proclaimed in a manifesto-like article entitled "*¿Salvará la cultura a las ciudades?*" ("Will culture save our cities?"), published in the newspaper *La Vanguardia* in May 2018, he is striving to "politicise cultural policy" with the objective of contributing to the transformative discourses of contemporary society and the creation of "an open and socially just city". The flagship project meant to jumpstart the implementation of this vision was the weeklong festival Ciutat Oberta. Biennial del Pensament (Open City. Thinking Biennale), which took place in October. With a budget of €700,000 the biennial is one of ICUB's largest and most prestigious initiatives.

Although the policy ideals behind the biennial have been presented as somewhat radical, they strongly resonate with wider international trends and debates in urban cultural policy. Since the turn of the century there has been a gradual shift away from so-called "creative city" policies that prioritise urban economic and physical regeneration and towards more holistic and sustainable approaches that seek to balance economic with social and cultural priorities. Crucially, this turn is not limited to Europe, which stood at the centre of urban cultural policy

debates during the second half of the twentieth century, but a broader international paradigm shift can be observed. The international scope of this reorientation is closely linked with the growing importance that culture has been attributed in the global debate on sustainable development, which gained popular traction during the elaboration phase of the 2030 Agenda and subsequently the New Urban Agenda – the first major United Nations policy processes that consulted cities and other local stakeholders.

Yet, the biennial also stands at odds with these international trends in cultural policy. Large-scale urban cultural festivals have traditionally been at the heart of creative city policies as strategies for place-marketing and tourism attraction. At the same time, they tend to cater to social groups that already hold the cultural capital to appreciate the content presented. The question thus arises of how this cultural format can be adapted to the goals and values of more holistic and emancipatory urban development policies. In short, the case of the biennial offers a chance to evaluate some of the challenges and opportunities involved in rethinking and aligning traditional cultural policy initiatives with the transition to sustainable urban development.

### 1. The politicisation of urban cultural policy

In a [recent article](#) Nicolás Barbieri has argued that cultural policy has until now largely remained a blind spot in the commons-based governance ambitions of Spain's so-called "city councils of change" – the city councils whose mayors and governing representatives come from social movements that led

the anti-austerity protests which began in May 2011 and who were elected into office in Barcelona, Madrid, Valencia and Zaragoza in the 2015 municipal elections. While there have been efforts to make decision-making processes more participatory in portfolios ranging from urban planning to municipal budgeting, data collection, energy and water, culture has remained on the margins. As Barbieri observes, the new administrations have partially adopted the discourse on cultural rights, but they are far from systematically translating it into strategic policy plans. There are some notable isolated initiatives working in this direction like programmes that address territorial inequalities through the decentralisation of cultural resources and activities. For example, Madrid and Barcelona have stepped up support for cultural centres at the district level, with Madrid City Council increasing funding for the Madrid Activa programme (established in 2013) by 25% and ICUB creating the Distrito Cultural initiative in 2015. Another notable research and development programme started by ICUB in 2016 is Cultura Viva, which seeks to strengthen decentralised, participatory and networked cultural production by bringing together communities, cultural institutions and independent cultural spaces. That said, most initiatives continue to adhere to a classic social democratic paradigm of cultural policy and its top-down “democratisation of culture” approach, which seeks to ensure equal opportunities of access to cultural works selected and defined by official experts and centrally programmed activities.

Although the notion of a politicised cultural policy outlined in Subirats’s article does not operate with the notion of cultural commons, its guiding values of “autonomy”, “equality” and “diversity” have similar objectives. They are part of a well-established discourse on “cultural democracy”, which goes a step beyond the democratisation of culture by promoting the greatest possible diversity of forms of cultural expression and encouraging active participation in cultural policy decisions. At the heart of this discourse stands a broad, anthropological concept of culture as the “way of life” of individuals and communities. The systematic political implementation of cultural democracy first emerged in western European cities in the 1970s in Italy (Bologna and Rome), West Germany (Freiburg, Hamburg and Stuttgart), France (Lyon), Denmark (Copenhagen) and Britain (London and Sheffield), where mostly left-controlled authorities broke with the post-war tradition of assigning a marginal role to cultural policy by linking it with education, social and urban policy. Similar to Subirats’s vision for Barcelona, these initiatives – which were intimately related to the rise of urban social movements after 1968, including feminism, gay and ethnic minority rights, environmentalism and community action – saw cultural and political action as intimately related. As Franco Bianchini and Jude Bloomfield (2001) showed, cultural policy became an emancipatory tool for empowering disadvantaged and marginalised social groups to express their voice, as well as for reviving the city’s function as a shared and pluralist public sphere. In particular, local administrations of the “new left” redefined the relationship between the local state and civil society by giving a generous degree of cultural and political autonomy to grassroots initiatives.

Past and present efforts to politically implement cultural democracy at the local level clearly demonstrate how cultural rights, understood as equal opportunities to participate in

and shape cultural life, are a fundamental part of the right to the city. By strengthening individual and collective cultural capacities, people are empowered to participate in the cultural production of a city’s public sphere and to become competent, confident and engaged citizens. Charles Landry (2015) described such cultural processes that reinvigorate a public and shared commons by facilitating people’s meaningful engagement with their city as “civic urbanity”. In contrast to the apolitical private consumer, civic urbanity fosters cultural citizens. However, as Landry emphasises, civic urbanity is a normative idea – “the promise of a better city” – that does not come naturally but requires cultural policies that are based on secular-humanist values and commons-based thinking.

## 2. Shifting social and economic priorities

When examined in an international context, the biennial and the cultural policy framework underpinning it can be identified as part of a wider (re)turn to socially and culturally progressive urban cultural policies. Despite the success of some of the early emancipatory policy models mentioned above, beginning in the late 1980s municipal governments in Europe tended to prioritise cultural strategies that promoted urban physical regeneration, economic development and city marketing; a trend that in many places lasted well into the 2000s. A political shift to the right and growing pressures on the financial resources of local governments created a climate in which the language of investment came to replace the language of subsidy. So-called “creative city” policies emerged as effective responses to the profound changes in urban socioeconomic structures brought about by accelerating technological advancement and globalisation. Efforts to transform former industrial cities into service-orientated economies were accompanied by a growing interest in cultural infrastructures and major events as drivers of urban regeneration, economic innovation and job creation. Further, with growing inter-city competition for mobile international capital, skilled labour and tourism, a cosmopolitan cultural life became central to enhancing what Richard Florida later termed the “quality of place”.

Although, as Sharon Zukin (1982) demonstrated, culture-led urban economic regeneration first emerged as a bottom-up process in American cities in the 1970s, it was European cities which a decade later developed top-down cultural policies to initiate similar urban transformations. While the direct impact of these policies on the creation of wealth and employment has been hard to measure, they significantly contributed to urban regeneration by facilitating the construction of internationally attractive reputations for cities of different economic functions. Franco Bianchini (1993) identifies three categories of European cities that effectively used cultural policies to change their internal and external image during this period. The first were declining industrial cities such as Glasgow, Newcastle, Lille, Bilbao, Genoa and Turin, which used international cultural flagship projects as symbols of rebirth and renewal (e.g. Glasgow was European Capital of Culture in the 1990s and Bilbao built a Guggenheim museum). A second category constituted provincial cities like Linz, Rhine, Montpellier and Modena, which promoted innovative cultural activities including high-tech architecture and new

media art to project themselves as innovative and cosmopolitan. Finally, wealthy but culturally underdeveloped cities such as Frankfurt, which were eager to consolidate their competitive advantage among other aspiring “global cities”, invested heavily in cultural infrastructures to close the gap between their high economic status and low cultural capital. The famous “Barcelona model”, which has been celebrated for successfully combining cultural strategies with urban regeneration to address social problems (at least in its early phases, up until the mid-1990s), sits somewhere between the first and second category.

While urban cultural regeneration strategies are today widely accepted as effective and used by cities around the world, dissatisfaction with the shortcomings of this approach has proliferated. Most cultural policies that are aimed at fostering local economic growth and supporting city marketing strategies have highly controversial spatial, sociocultural and economic implications. Conflicts arise between cultural provision in wealthy city centres and poorer peripheral neighbourhoods; between cultural policymaking oriented at consumption and production (i.e. policies that promote cultural heritage to expand tourism, attract external investment and boost retailing and consumer service industries *versus* policies that support the specialised infrastructures and skills required for local cultural production); and between funding for permanent facilities such as iconic museum buildings, concert halls, libraries and so on that often initiate gentrification and ephemeral participatory cultural processes. In short, the sociopolitical rationale of urban cultural policymaking and its alignment with socially progressive agendas have tended to be severely compromised by creative city policies that link culture with economic growth and international projection.

Although it is difficult to generalise about the evolution of urban cultural policies across countries and regions because of insufficient comparative research and differences in official definitions of “culture”, ideological backgrounds, financial resources and public, private and third-sector relations, it is usually possible to identify some common trends. About the time since the turn of the century it can be said that, in an attempt to reverse the instrumentalisation of culture for urban regeneration and economic development purposes – which begun in Europe in the late 1980s and which was adapted by city governments in Latin America and Asia in the late 1990s – there has been a growing international trend to formulate more integrated approaches to cultural policymaking that seek to reconcile economic with social and cultural development priorities.

### 3. Towards integrated cultural policies

The international scope of this reorientation in cultural policy is closely linked to the growing importance culture has attained in the global debate on sustainable development. The latter opened a space for awareness-raising and knowledge- and experience-sharing across countries and regions that was previously unknown. Although individual efforts to reinforce the importance of culture for sustainable development date back to the 1980s, the cause only gained popular traction during the elaboration phase of the post-2015 global

agendas. Unlike the earlier Millennium Development Goals, the 2030 Agenda and subsequently the New Urban Agenda (NUA) set out from a more holistic and human-centred vision of development that gives equal importance to and interrelates economic, social and environmental processes. In response, several initiatives emerged that lobbied for the idea that culture was central to this holistic framing. The most significant of these initiatives were the UNESCO congresses on “Culture: Key to Sustainable Development” (2013) and “Culture for Sustainable Cities” (2015); the strategy on culture and sustainable development formulated by the Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments following its “Post-2015 Agenda towards Habitat III” summit; and the global advocacy campaign “The Future We Want Includes Culture”, run by several global networks of local governments, national arts councils and civil society organisations. Underpinning these efforts was an understanding of culture – defined as creativity, heritage, knowledge and diversity – on the one hand, as an “enabler” and “driver” of people-centred development and, on the other hand, as a development goal “in itself”. Whereas the former understanding of culture stresses the mediating role of cultural practices and values in the achievement of economic, social and ecological sustainability, the latter posits that development is also a question of cultural capabilities and rights.

While these advocacy efforts did not achieve their desired result, they managed to position culture in the mainstream public policy discourse on sustainability. Thus, although the 2030 Agenda does not include a stand-alone goal on culture, it mentions culture in the areas of education, economic growth, sustainable cities and sustainable consumption and production. **The NUA goes a step further** by acknowledging that “culture and cultural diversity ... provide an important contribution to the sustainable development of cities, human settlements and citizens, empowering them to play an active and unique role in development initiatives”. The more favourable stance of the NUA, which implicitly alludes to culture and cultural rights as a development goal in itself, is in part related to the fact that cities have played – and continue to play – a leading role in promoting the integration of concepts of culture into the development agenda. A prominent example is the global network United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) with headquarters in Barcelona, which coordinates the Agenda 21 for Culture and was one of the lead networks in the “The Future We Want Includes Culture” campaign. The actions of UCLG are representative of broader debates on the future of urban development that increasingly stress the role of cities as spaces of transformation and of culture as lying at the heart of strategies for urban renewal and the creation of more inclusive, creative and sustainable cities.

However, despite the prominence of cities in efforts to include culture in the sustainable development agenda, until recently the main trajectories of local governments’ cultural policies emerged separately from these debates. A special issue of the *International Journal of Cultural Policy* on “**Cultural Policies for Sustainable Development**” from 2017, suggests that this division has been the result of silo-thinking in urban governance, as well as of enduring narrow definitions of culture as “artistic expression” and “heritage” as opposed to broader anthropological definitions as “way of life” that

are inherently more related to questions of sustainability in city administrations. But this status quo is gradually changing. As the publication **“Culture in the Sustainable Development Goals: A Guide for Local Action”** presented by UCLG earlier this year indicates, there is increasing awareness and exchange happening among local policymakers around the culture-development nexus. The latter guide presents case studies from around the world that show how local administrations are taking a transversal approach to cultural policy by integrating culture into implementation strategies for all the 17 SDGs. From an administrative viewpoint, this requires moving beyond traditionally defined cultural policy and its specific areas of heritage conservation, community projects and so on towards an intersectoral perspective that considers culture across portfolios and that involves the culture department in sustainable development programmes.

Notably, there is significant overlap between UCLG’s agenda on culture and sustainable development and the cultural rights policy framework behind Barcelona’s Open City Biennial of Thought. Similar to the latter, a sustainable development lens redefines the “politics” of cultural policy by linking culture with questions of human rights, social inclusion, democracy and education. Although the concept of culture as an enabler of economic development is a key dimension of the culture and sustainable development debate, the emphasis is generally on the sociocultural dimensions. In particular, culture is seen as vital for assuring citizen participation in the public sphere and, by implication, in public programmes for more sustainable urban development. It is this emphasis on the co-creation of a more sustainable city through culture that is also central to the biennial initiative.

#### **4. Rethinking our urban model**

The biennial’s title “Open City” is a tribute to a certain idea or model of city whose main theorist has been Richard Sennett during the past three decades. In Sennett’s writings the open city is a physical and social structure that promotes porosity and interaction and is sufficiently incomplete to continuously adjust to and be redefined by the everyday practices and needs of its inhabitants. Against Le Corbusier’s over-determined modernism he posits Jane Jacobs’s thinking on urban density and diversity as physical conditions that stimulate informal social interaction and that form the essence of city life. Building on Jacobs’s ideas, Sennett places special emphasis on the need for what he calls “modest” or “incomplete” urban design to lay the foundations for this spatial and social “openness” to unfold.

Crucially, the title of the biennial was programmatic. The condition of openness described and theorised by Sennett is also what ICUB aimed for with the biennial. Instead of intervening in the urban environment through built form, the intention was to shape it through a weeklong cultural festival that consisted of more than 100 open-air and free-of-charge events that took the big questions and debates of our time out onto the city’s streets, squares and markets. Bringing together some of today’s most prominent international thinkers, practitioners and activists with their local counterparts, the aim was to transform the city into a space for reflection on what the

organisers called our “era of epochal change”. Inspired by Zygmunt Bauman’s writing on “times of interregnum”, the concept of epochal change refers to the radical social, economic and political transformations and uncertainties that societies from north to south and east to west have been experiencing since the onset of globalisation and to which the twenty-first century is yet to articulate adequate political responses. Departing from the nowadays common view that these transformations and possible responses to them concentrate in cities, the biennial’s programme was organised around the following thematic pillars: the democratic city, the diverse city, the technological city, and the liveable city.

When considering that over the past three decades large-scale cultural festivals have become a core part of creative city policies as strategies for urban regeneration and international place-marketing, one may wonder whether a biennial is the right initiative for implementing more emancipatory cultural policy models. Especially in the cultural policy trajectory of Barcelona, cultural mega-events in the broad sense (i.e. including sports and technology events) have been used to boost the local economy and attract international audiences. Following the successful execution of the 1992 Olympic Games, the annual Sónar music festival was launched in 1994, in 2004 Barcelona hosted the World Culture Forum, and since 2011 it has been the capital of the World Mobile Congress. However, compared with these mega-events, the biennial had very different intentions. It sits much closer to the 18 international case studies featured in the report **“Festivals as Integrative Sites”** (2018) by the Urban Institute and the African Centre for Cities, which examines how festivals can contribute to sustainable development by playing a role in more inclusive and just urban transformations. In particular, the Barcelona biennial shares with the report’s case studies a deep consideration of place in which festival sites are not just backdrops but constitutive in themselves. By taking the biennial out into the city’s streets and by programming events in the centre and more peripheral neighbourhoods, the organisers – similar to other new initiatives of urban sustainability – explicitly focused on addressing local audiences and enhancing public space by fostering public dialogue and democracy. The objective was to transform the festival sites into open public spaces where a Habermasian “reasoning public” could debate ideas, knowledge and feelings free from the influence of power and where the status quo could be questioned through collectively produced visions of an alternative future. Cultural democracy was to be advanced by enabling the capacities of a critically informed and educated public and by including a great diversity of perspectives and viewpoints among the speakers.

However, the public space produced by the biennial was less democratic than its organisers had hoped. Although the audience numbers were large, especially for events with star figures such as Judith Butler, Richard Sennett and Gayatri Spivak, these numbers did not automatically equal participation and inclusivity. For the most part, the events had traditional formats such as lectures and podium discussions that gave only limited room to audience participation. While the people who attended the biennial probably learned a great deal, cultural democracy in the sense of the co-production of content was not achieved. Further, although the events

were held in public spaces that are accessible to everyone in principle, most of the audience consisted of groups that already held a certain level of “cultural capital” necessary to engage with and appreciate the often academic contents presented. These observations raise questions about the wider social impact of the biennial and the extent to which a single liminal experience can effect a change in the opinions and behaviours of visitors and by extension the city’s social fabric. It is more realistic to expect that the biennial will be able to induce change after several editions have been presented. Once the festival has made a name for itself, it will certainly be easier to mobilise new audience groups and to experiment with more participatory event formats.

That said, the biennial produced other, more immediate benefits. Commenting on the rise of “city festivals” that aim to rethink contemporary urban models (besides the biennial, for example, the We Make the City festival launched in Amsterdam this June and the Make City festival first held in Berlin in 2011), Greg Richards and Lénia Marques recently suggested in an unpublished policy brief that these festivals are representative of a broader shift in urban cultural policy away from “place-marketing” towards “place-making”. City festivals are becoming more popular among policymakers as part of broader knowledge-generating efforts geared towards producing new ideas and strategies on how to make cities more sustainable. They are not just another cultural initiative, but the hope is that they can inform future policymaking. On the one hand, they provide a space for thinking about the city in an environment that brings together the views of international and local experts and – if done well – the thoughts, needs and aspirations of citizens. On the other, they constitute a spatially and temporally bound public sphere or “mini-city” (to use Richards and Marques’s words), which can serve as an experimental ground for trying out new ideas in urban governance and social innovation. Crucially, this attempt to rethink our city model – in all its social, economic, environmental, technological and political dimensions – from a cultural perspective is an important step towards changing our thinking about culture and towards formulating a more transversal approach to cultural policy that does not shy away from intervening in sociopolitical and development questions.

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