

## **A Daring Promise from the North of Europe**

### **The Opening of the European Capital of Culture 2008, Stavanger, Norway**

<http://www.stavanger2008.no/>

#### ***I. The opening***

How does one compete with Ringo Starr opening a parallel event in the much bigger city, Liverpool? Does one need a little help from a friend?

<http://www.chron.com/disp/story.mpl/ent/celebrities/5446767.html>

How can a small city in the Norwegian wood almost unknown further south in Europe become a landmark on the continent's cultural map? How does one stage the European Capital of Culture in a country that is not a member of the European Union?

12 January 2008, and a crystal clear day welcomes 60 thousand Norwegians on the streets of Stavanger. The parade of compatriots is welcomed with Nordic passion a colourful manifestation of what the people from Brussels call participation. Street artists from all over the continent and magicians from the region mingle with the crowd.

<http://www.stavanger2008.no/?event=about.pressrelease>

A crystal clear opening speech by Jan Egeland . the UN steel-capped expert from Stavanger . puts the accent on the great responsibility of the culture of living together on the globe: "There are more than one billion rich people on earth, and most of them are Europeans. We could easily help the one billion hungry people on earth to find ways out of their abject misery. We could easily help the 100 million children with no educational prospects to receive at least primary school education"

Norway's stance on human rights, peace, freedom of expression and support for those in exile was an integral part of the application bid for the Cultural Capital and impressed the jury years ago.

A sure sign of the decision for the pursuing artistic excellence and negotiation of difference was the appointment of a risk-taking artistic director, Mary Miller, both a foreigner and true insider at the same time.

[http://missculture.merseyblogs.co.uk/2008/01/a\\_look\\_at\\_stavanger.html](http://missculture.merseyblogs.co.uk/2008/01/a_look_at_stavanger.html)

For more information about the programme, please go to:

<http://www.stavanger2008.no/?event=about.showElement&id=549&catId=10>

<http://www.stavanger2008.no/?event=about.showElement&id=541&catId=12>

<http://www.stavanger2008.no/?event=projects.index>

Promises seem to become reality on a number of issues: innovation and locality, global awareness and artistic excellence, a rich country/rich city's bid for an open port, fearlessness in the face of globalisation, cosmopolitan character without disregard for tradition and solidarity with the people. The energy centre of Europe claims to become one of its cultural power stations as well.

A spectacular firework display at the end of the opening day lights up the night sky over Stavanger sparking off bright ideas and proud invitations as if to say: Come and see us, we reach out to the world. Small white wooden houses lean into the storms of the North, embracing the harbour of generations of travellers. harbouring and harvesting, investing and supporting. A European Cultural Capital on the smaller scale demonstrates the virtue of the old truly European saying: Don't make yourself so small. you are not that big.

## ***II. Creating Capitals – creating Europe?***

With the exception perhaps of the Eurovision song contest, there is nothing in the cultural and, more importantly, in the cultural artistic arena in wider Europe to trigger greater interest or wider audiences than the Capital of Culture scheme.

To use the chance of a Cultural Capital award is, of course, a matter of re-invention of cities like Glasgow; or city re-definition like Lille; or about who might be the second in the country, like Pecs. It can also be about regeneration. like Essen in Germany's Ruhr area. It is a matter of structural funds, used mainly by, although not exclusively, the new EU member states. It is also about marketing a city and tourism, televised image-building as with Graz which was not only interesting, but also convincing. It also be about cultural dynamism for underprivileged regions like the applicants from

Eastern Slovakia. It might also involve party politics, local elections and mayoral campaigns. The application from Patras suffered somewhat from such underlying interests and some French applicant cities have strong stakes in political arena. The successful Capital scheme is also about smaller cities with a regional claim like Cork.

Cultural policy development is being stimulated by bids and competition, and its relative absence is felt sharply as a void; and there are all the good, and less good, human, political, environmental, psychological reasons for the enormous boost of the Capital scheme. It has become a major business agenda for mayors and national politicians, local economies and national and regional marketing, for investors and for investment returns.

Luckily, competition is regulated and, more than ever now, this is done by an independent jury composed of local and international experts. No brand is given without evidence of artistic excellence, participation of citizens, European added value, and sustainability and feasibility in the ever present tension between ambitions and resources. This is a competition of the highest level for the sake of getting the big machine of culture in Europe on your side.

And yet there is more to it for Europe. Citizens in a given town, region or country are proud of the place to which they belong and share similar aspirations to be visible and recognised in Europe. Most importantly, they are proud to invite Europe in and to demonstrate cultural diversity at its best.

The Cultural Capital scheme has attracted the curiosity of an ever increasing number of Europeans, from all walks of life and not just professional *feuilleton* readers. They are now planning visits in their travel schedule as a must in leisure and excitement and as a result remote areas are moving up on the cultural map (like Sibiu, for example) . ignorance decreases and interest becomes vital.

New European networks emerge - joining future applicants with successful Capitals of the past. Included in new networks is the new class of younger artistic directors working trans-nationally, and the cultural managers and artists of all levels and disciplines. The Capital brand has developed gravity, captivating the attention of the media, meetings and conferences of all kinds, to the cities of the year. Inter-city meetings and intercultural dialogue conferences are held; cultural networks gather in Capitals for their annual assemblies; business meetings benefit from the glory and

surprise factor; conferences of cities and mayors, even the European Cultural Parliament, take place. Capitals generate a critical mass of fringe gatherings with a huge multiplying effect.

Europe becomes tangible in many ways.

Do the artists really care, beyond their new assignments? Are they not just adding another destination to their travel schedule? Are they not just coming and going? The morning after in Stavanger saw buses and planes filled with guests and artists travelling home or flying on to their next destination. In my conversations with them some admitted to being left with a funny feeling. The event had offered something special . a tangible contribution to a modern ritual with deeper repercussions. Many artists left and will leave a special mark in the invisible hall of challenge and as a result their CVs shine brighter now. Some already want to go back.

The following week I talked to a Dutch artist, currently working on the theme of hospitality. She was chosen in a poll by citizens of the Stavanger region (organised by the newspapers and TV) as was the hospital of Stavanger chosen as one of the 8 places of meaning and culture in the neighbourhoods. She had started contemplating on a project to improve communication in the very hospital, and in the meantime the first in a series of soaps on the hospital is ready for Norwegian prime time TV, based on a all encompassing process of mobilisation amongst patients and hospital staff of all kind; a hilarious result of role switching and persistent work on hierarchies and communication. This is artistic intervention triggered by an internationally renowned artist who connects this project with the many others emerging in many societal contexts in Europe. And the great thing is: this project has already built on the legacy of Stavanger (and its hospital) for after 2008.

The Stavanger website and a permanent documentary film team will feature the hundreds of creative contributions to a growing story etched in the memories of hundreds of thousands of citizens at home and abroad. It is a fabric of excellence, and a social fabric extending beyond the walls of the cities. For example, a church in Cork was, for almost a year, the home to a knitting project where locals and visitors, with or without disability, knitted a huge woollen modern carpet following the rhythms of the town. The Cultural Capitals are knitting a kind of invisible European carpet which we are not always able to perceive but do certainly get the feeling of in some of the cases.

A propos carpets, there will soon be another type . a kelimq. in Istanbul 2010, flying across the continent. The choice of Istanbul was a brave cultural decision for the sake of inclusion in times when politicians started playing odd games with the accession negotiations of Turkey to the EU. Culture at its best expresses cultural cooperation as cultural provocation.

Research on this emblematic scheme is widely used by the experts and applicants. See the study by Robert Palmer:

[http://www.books.co.uk/greg\\_richards\\_robert\\_palmer/eventful\\_cities/9780750669870/](http://www.books.co.uk/greg_richards_robert_palmer/eventful_cities/9780750669870/)

Apart from research, we should be prepared for other types of discourse on creating Europe through the creation of Cultural Capitals. We should invite more discussions from within the artistic community inspired by artistic directors and the programme directors of very successful bids, such as Laurent Dreano, Lille and Mary Miller, Stavanger.

### ***III. Stavanger's pitch in Europe***

Stavanger is a particular case in question. A small city in a country of just a few million inhabitants, Stavanger is a resource of fossil fuel and probably one of the richest regions in Norway and Europe. It is amazingly decent in how it deals with wealth and has remained unspoiled in environmental terms. The role of the city has to be understood in the context of Norway as a non-EU country with close ties to the EU and the world at large. On the European level, Norway provides very substantial funds especially directed to the new member states, like Poland, part of which are explicitly devoted to culture. On the global level, it suffices just to mention the Norwegian section of the Nobel Prize. Under the leitmotif of Open Port Stavanger has been chosen as Europe's Cultural Capital of 2008 together with another port city, Liverpool.

There is, of course, not much point in comparing apples and pears. Tallinn will probably never discover oil, nor will Turku. Shrinking cities in the Ruhr valley (becoming green again) have to grapple differently with the power engine culture. Yet the question which remains valid is whether or not there is anything that could substitute the gift, the oil fuelling the engine of the European dream, in other parts of Europe, and globally.

Despite the accidental reasons . amongst other merits . for the transformation of one the poorest countries in Europe into one of the richest, there is a connection between Norway and the living myth of the European dream. The country and its new Cultural Capital, Stavanger, have since long brilliantly fulfilled the EU Lisbon Agenda and have become fervent advocates of peace and prosperity, tolerance and openness, equality and competitiveness, flourishing of the arts and of culture, involvement of the citizens and moderate politics balancing interests.

What makes Stavanger particularly interesting as a Cultural Capital is the question of solidarity and shared responsibility. Yet, there also lies the risk of Stavanger. If it were just a dollhouse of ~~man~~anna from the North Sea, a luxurious contemporary museum of success and cultural bravery, it would not only fail the Cultural Capital scheme but coin it a symbol of the old story of the rich Europe.

Yet, it seems that the Norwegians have dared to take positions which are predictably uncomfortable, because such positions will always demand sharing. Stavanger has invited others in need to tell their stories of otherness, poverty and inequality in a safe heaven. The city has found a way to express their aspirations and challenges through the intelligentsia and the artistic agents provocateurs. I think there lies the benchmark for Stavanger's Year: Will the myths be exposed, will the most daring questions be asked? Will the artists pick up the exceptional European context in exceptional settings of courage?

By the way: I am not talking here about the idea of Norway's accession the European Union. Norwegians will have to answer this question.

For all aficionados of Europe . not only of art - there are good reasons to visit Stavanger: to study the city, to get involved in the big event and to start translating dreams into a broader European agenda.