European Capital of Culture as a regional development tool? The case of Marseille-Provence 2013

"*…the European Capital of Culture project will make a decisive contribution to building a true metropolis with essential practices for cooperation between different local authorities. The project's success will prefigure and determine that of the Marseilles Greater Urban Area*"
 (MP2013 2008, p22, original emphasis).

Introduction

In 2013 Marseille-Provence will hold the title European Capital of Culture (ECoC). Marseilles, the lead city in the bid, is significantly larger and poorer than the other urban districts included in the project. In common with a number of other Capital of Culture projects, most famously Glasgow in 1990 and Liverpool in 2008 (Andres 2011), one of the central premises of the proposal is that Marseilles requires the title to assist in the development of a metropolitan urban area (Letarjet 2010). The decision of urban leaders in Marseille to use the ECoC opportunity as part of a broader "cultural metropolitan project"(ibid.) follows increasing trends to use cultural policy to stimulate economic growth and urban development across Europe (Hellie 2010). This rationale is based on a vague but growing understanding that European cities are increasingly caught up in global, inter-urban competition (Harding 1997) and that cultural policies can be used to achieve social, economic or political objectives (Griffiths et al. 2003; Bassett, et al. 2005). For example, an evaluation of twenty one European Capitals of Culture projects found that almost all of the candidate cities included improving the city's image and urban regeneration as key objectives (Palmer/Rae Associates 2006).

Whilst there are similarities within the restructuring processes in cities and regions across Europe, this process happens differently in different cities at different times (Beauregard and Haila 1997). This paper examines how a multi-level cultural policy initiative is responded to and viewed by local actors in one European city region. Drawing upon nine months of ethnographic fieldwork and over 30 interviews conducted with public officials, political leaders, urban developers and social and cultural operators concerned with urban and cultural development in Marseilles(1), it explores to what extent this cultural project has served to forge and sustain a 'successful' Marseille-Provence metropolitan project(2).

Background to Marseilles's metropolitan aspirations – "Marseille must change scale"

The metropolitan aspirations set out in the MP2013 bid must be seen in the light of efforts to create a metropolitan area around Marseilles, a policy which has been on the table since the late 1960s(3). Driven largely by the central government, this was a strategy to deal with the severe social and economic consequences faced by the city after deindustrialisation and decolonisation in the post-war period (Savitch and Kantor 2002). The structural problems to be addressed are many and complex. Despite being Europe's fourth busiest port, and being based in a department with considerable industrial activity, the city is much poorer than its neighbours, has higher unemployment, lower number of high-skilled people, and with greater inequality between the richest and poorest 10% than in other similar sized cities (Roncayolo 1997; Ingram 2009). It is in a far weaker economic position in terms of control over capital flows and has a smaller tax base than the surrounding urban districts (Ronai, 2009). Cooperation with other local

authorities in the region has traditionally been hindered by the difference in size – Marseilles has six times the population of the region's next most populous city Aix-en-Provence (850,000 compared to 142 743), disparities in wealth and a history of rivalries both between and within political factions across the region (MP2013, Ronai ibid.).

Notwithstanding the inter-urban and cross-governmental political wrangling and posturing, in interviews and conversations carried out with representatives from regional department and local levels of government in this research there was almost unanimous agreement that Marseilles needed to change, to *upscale*, "in the face of globalisation" if the city was to compete within Europe and internationally. There was a belief that to do this the city needed to increase the size of its territory, augment its concentration of financial and economic resources and improve its reputation so that it could attract the much sought-after multinationals and high-value tourists and, perhaps, address some of the social and economic problems that face many of its inhabitants(4).

Fifty years on local political infighting, the redistributive aspects of metropolitan territorial planning and questions of cultural identity continue to hinder attempts to forge this Marseillaise greater urban area (Douay 2007). Some progress towards this objective was made in 2000, when the Marseille Provence Metropole (MPM) Urban Community was created. MPM, part of a national policy to coordinate inter-urban planning, brings together Marseilles and seventeen neighbouring urban districts(5). However a number of important urban districts refused to join, including Aix-en-Provence, Aubagne and the important industrial region around the port of Fos. Instead, they established their own urban communities. The grounds for rejecting incorporation of MPM – "la Grande Marseille" – were partly based on fears about the additional economic costs of being part of an urban community that comprised such a poor and large city. In part it was spurned on 'cultural grounds'. For example the Mayor of Aix-en-Provence, Maryse Joissains Masini, asserted that Marseilles which was "ouverte à toutes cultures" (open to all cultures), had little in common with an Aix which culturally looked to the interior of France. Similarly Aubagne rejected any notion of a mediterranean multiculturalism, instead attempting to brand itself with a Provencal cultural identity (Ronai, ibid: 140). In spite of this, 'culture' and the MP2013 project were considered by many urban leaders to be a catalyst that might both change the image of Marseilles and contribute to the city's metropolitan aspirations.

 The cultural-led metropolitan development?

"Cultural policies are fundamental today, it is one of the axes through which to grow the economy" (6)

As the above quote from the head of Metropolitan Development for Marseilles reveals, culture is now thoroughly embedded in local urban policy. Around the mid-1990s, local and state decisions makers began to invest in resources that would add value to the urban regeneration through the investment in cultural infrastructure, iconic institutions and events to develop some "symbolic capital" (Bernié-Boissard 2010, Ingram 2009). The objective was to move from a reputation synonymous with social, economic and cultural problems to an urban brand that was
à la mode (Peraldi and Samson, 2005). Policies included the decision by the French state to move the Museum of European and Mediterranean civilisations (MuCEM) to the Marseille waterfront, and the multi-level decision to bid to be the French European Capital of Culture in 2013 (Morel 2010).

Other attempts to raise the city's profile on the international scale took the form of a broader, state-led regeneration project, 'Euroméditerranée', launched in 1995 in partnership with the local council, the

department and the region. Linked closely with regional, national and European objectives to maintain a presence in the Mediterranean basis, this involved the restructuring of the waterfront in what is the largest redevelopment project in Europe. It has an explicit aim to reposition the city within the top twenty Metropolitan areas in Europe(7). The creation of Euro-mediterranean metropole that has global reach is also a keystone of the Marseilles Provence Metropolitan Urban Master Plan (SCOT 2010).

Impacts of MP2013-led on metropolitan symbolic capital and socialisation

When analysing what difference the Capital of Culture project has made on metropolitan development, many respondents considered that the bid writing process was an important first step This multi-agency, collaborative operation generated a significant federative and symbolic effect, bringing together for the first time local authorities, departmental and regional levels of government, representatives from the Marseilles-Provence Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the state-led Euro-mediterranean project, amongst others. The fact that local political actors were willing to jointly and publicly converge around a single policy headed up by Marseilles was considered 'historic', particularly in light of the earlier rejection of the MPM Urban Community project by a number of urban districts.

There was some initial optimism that the ECoC project could provide a means to overcome tensions that previously had stymied a coherent regional or metropolitan policy. This public and political expression of support was seen to create a 'symbolic capital'. However, the withdrawal of Toulon from the Marseille-Provence 2013 project in December 2010, and the reluctance for Aix-en-Provence to commit financially to the project raised doubts in people's minds of whether this symbolic capital would translate into real regional development(8). Political support for the project across the region remains fragile (Andres ibid.:65). As Swyngedouw has argued (1997:140), the production of new social spatial scales remains a deeply conflictual process.

In terms of other tangible impacts of MP2013, there was broad agreement that MP2013 had contributed to an increased cooperation between local authorities, in the form of regular meetings between technocrats from across the different levels of local government (municipal, departmental and regional) and urban districts working in thematic groups such as tourism, communication and the provision of an integrated public transport syste(9).   The Deputy Director of MP2013 contended that this had resulted in a new culture of working, across the three levels of local government, although he was still cautious about labelling this as a success(10).

Some have argued that the process of multi-agency and cross-regional socialisation generated by such by the MP2013 project may lead to a metropolitan-scale consciousness and policy networks. This is held to be the case in other European Capital of Culture programmes such as Lille which after their 2004 European Capital of Culture programme (Liefooghe 2010). Yet in Marseilles there was considerable interrogation about whether these networks and collaboration would last after the last fireworks had exploded on the eve of 2014. These doubts were in part due to an awareness of the fragility of the political support for Marseilles' plans to be come "la Grande Marseille". They were also partly based on a belief that the MP2013 project has been used as a substitute for a real and sustainable local cultural policy, and that was little local institutional ownership of the project(11).   In the interviews many expressed the view that relations between the elected representatives of city of Marseilles and the MP2013 association were mired by distrust (although on an individual level relations between the municipality and the association are said to be improving) and that there was little dialogue between those responsible for wider cultural and urban policy in the city and those responsible for the MP2013 project. A view that was

publicly acknowledged by the Director of MP2013 at a press conference on 24 February 2011 where he suggested that some local elected representatives continue to view the MP13 project as being 'Parisian'. Further, many of the urban planners or architects had little or no interaction with MP2013 or the networks associated with it(12).

Even respondents who were hopeful that the development of a metropolitan area would be furthered as a result of the ECoC programme – "we've got to believe in it!" – agreed that it would only happen if there was a real transformation of the centre of the city and sufficient financing of the urban infrastructure(13). Issues of levels of investment to support inter-urban cooperation were also a recurrent concern. In an interview with staff at Espace Culture, the organisation responsible for promoting cultural activities within and around Marseilles, transport links and communication between the different urban districts were described as inadequate and a barrier to cross-regional activity. Whilst they felt that ECoC had increased awareness about activities taking place across different parts of the region and had contributed to the development of a regional, Provençal identity, lack of adequate public transport meant that those who would travel from one urban district to another would take their own cars(14).

There were even some questions raised about the wisdom of making metropolitan development a key objective of the ECoC project. Ulrich Fuchs, who as well as working for MP2013 was former Director of the Linz 2009 ECoC, regularly made public his view that the European Capital of Culture programme should be targeted at city rather than regional development. He felt that a lot of energy had been wasted in meeting the different political demands of partners across the region, energy that should have been spent developing the festival programme and infrastructure. Fuchs compared the cultural metropolitan project of Marseille-Provence with what he judged the successful use of the ECoC label for the development of a regional cultural identity in the Ruhr, Germany in 2010. In Ruhr the ECoC event took place after twenty-five years of investment in the regional infrastructure so that transportation and infrastructural links were already well-established. Using MP2013 to pave the way for a cohesive territorial space was considered by Fuchs to be approaching urban and regional development in reverse(15).

ECoC and the physical regeneration of Marseilles-Provence

Whilst the impacts on MP2013 on the promotion and coordination of new metropolitan partnerships rest in doubt, gaining the ECoC status has certainly changed the physical landscape of the region. Across the Marseille-Provence territory there are over sixty buildings sites associated with MP2013 underway(16). The massive restructuring of the Marseilles waterfront, where the majority of the major cultural infrastructural projects are being constructed has been daubed Marseilles 'Guggenheim'. It is claimed that it will cause Marseilles to 'rayonner' (shine, exert influence), in a similar way that the Guggenheim museum in Bilbao raised that city's international profile and attracted tourists(17). Despite all this activity, there was some scepticism, particularly from urban planners and architects, about the "ECoC" effect. It was argued that the effect on urban development might be no more any other city-wide festival with an international focus. A close reading of the MP2013 bid document shows that behind the headline objectives to develop a cultural metropolitan project there was always a pragmatic sense of the limitations of such a 'cultural' project. The ambitions within the proposal are carefully tempered, so that was claimed that MP2013 would only "support", "contribute", "tie in with" other policy initiatives and structures. In reality it can do no more than this. MP2013 only brings in an additional ten percent to the cultural budget usually dispensed in the Marseilles-Provence territories by local government, the state and Europe. Further, it has no direct control over the larger infrastructural projects that are taking place in the city and region, both points that were made by Bernard Collette, responsible for the Coordination of Territorial and Structural Projects at

MP2013(18). Other research has shown that without the commitment and involvement of a plurality of local actors and local ownership in the planning and use of buildings and public spaces, then sustainability and long-term benefits of such building projects is by no means guaranteed (Evans and Shaw 2006). It must also be noted that for some respondents, this investment in cultural infrastructure was a distraction from the development of longterm policies to deal with more deep-rooted economic and social problems that face the city(19), a criticism that has been levied at other cultural-led urban regeneration initiatives (for the case of Glasgow ECoC, see Mooney 2003).

Conclusion

In a context of a French policy favouring the creation of a metropolitan regions, and a widespread international belief that cultural policy and metropolitanisation can assist in the upscaling of a city such as Marseilles within the global economic system, the MP2013 project is seen locally as part of the continuing attempts to forge and sustain a cultural metropolitan project. Local elected officials and urban and regional planners have seized upon the initiative as a means to generate symbolic capital around the development of a Marseilles Greater Urban Area. Despite this, the project has been encumbered with problems that continue to hold it back. With less than two years to go, MP2013 remains only partially embedded within urban and metropolitan planning, and the cultural identity and metropolitan aspirations of Marseilles remain contested in the region. Doubts also remain not only about the resources allocated to regional development, but the political will to develop a regional infrastructure, such as an integrated transport or communication framework. There are concerns about how future budget cuts might affect cross-regional planning, and worries that without investment in the city and region's infrastructure any attempt to construct a metropolitan region will flounder.

As is made clear in urban scholarship, whilst cities are subject to global and national pressures that affect their restructuring, the specific outcomes of cultural-led regeneration projects are dependent upon the particular social, cultural and political context of individual cities. This is not to say that it is impossible to make comparisons between urban areas, nor that there are not broad global trends affecting urban transformation. Yet this research confirms the importance of analysing local dynamics – who or what has power and influence in a particular place – if we are to understand how particular multi-level projects are situationally implemented (Harding 1997). It is too early to judge definitively whether MP2013 will "prefigure and determine that of the Marseilles Greater Urban Area" and forge a symbolic and institutional framework that can rally political leaders, general public, private corporations and civil society stakeholders around the production of a new metropolitan scale for Marseilles. However, according to the local actors interviews for this research, at the present time real doubts about such an outcome remain.

Notes

(1) The research was carried out as part of a PhD research to develop a cross-country framework to compare the impact of cultural policy on everyday cosmopolitanism in multi-ethnic urban neighbourhoods in Liverpool and Marseilles.

(2) By drawing attention to the territorial ambitions for the project, the aim here is not to ignore other urban development objectives of the bid, for example, i) the objective to contribute towards the urban regeneration of some of the most deprived neighbourhoods in the city; ii) intentions to develop the cultural infrastructure of the city; or iii) the programme of cultural activities to increase the participation of local residents in cultural activities. Yet within the interview data there was an overwhelming sense that the key

objective of the ECoC was to reposition Marseilles nationally and internationally.

(3) The first master plan for the creation of the Marseillaise metropolitan area (Sche?ma d'ame?nagement de la Me?tropole marseillaise) was developed in 1969.

(4) Interview with Claude Vallette, Elected representative responsible for Metropolitan Development for the city of Marseille, June 2011

(5) http://www.marseille-provence.com, accessed 27 June 2011

(6) Interview with Claude Vallette, op cit.

(7) http://www.euromediterranee.fr, accessed 27 June 2011

(8) See for exampe/ http://www.laprovence.com/article/region/marseille-provence-2013-toulon-nadhere-plus, Accessed 25.04.2011

(9) Public discussion "Marseille 2013, y a-t'il un pilote dans l'avion ?", organised by Inrocks, Marseilles 29.04.2011

(10) Interview with Ulrich Fuchs, Deputy Director, MP2013, 22 June 2011

(11) Interview, Espace Culture, 01 July 2011

(12) Interview with architect involved in the Euro-méditerranéen redevelopment

(13) Interview with Patrick Muller, op cit.

(14) Interview, Espace Culture, op cit.

(15) Intervention by the Deputy Director of MP2013 Ulrich Fuchs during the meeting of the group Pensons le Matin, http://www.pensonslematin.org, 13 March 2011

(16) www.marseille-provence2013

(17) Notes taken at MP2013 press conference, 25 February 2011

(18) Interview, 03 May 2011

(19) Interview with Patrick Lacoste, Chef de la Mission aux Etudes, à l'Observation et à la Prospective. Délégation coordination des politiques contractuelles, territoriales et prospectives, Région PACA, 05 May 2011

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