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Libraries and UNESCO Cities of Literature

31 October 2021

- *The UNESCO Creative Cities programme, and in particular its Cities of Literature, is well-established, focusing on promoting creativity and participation as a driver of local development*
- *Libraries have often played (and continue to play) key roles in bidding for and managing City of Literature status, at least in some cities*
- *In some cases, status has brought additional funding, while in others, it has helped build support for libraries (from town halls to citizens), and raised profile, potentially contributing to the long-term resilience of our institutions*

Culture is arguably the fourth pillar of sustainable development. Not only are the safeguarding of heritage and the promotion of and access to contemporary culture valuable ends in themselves, but they also enable progress across the wider development agenda, promoting wellbeing, innovation, social cohesion, economic growth, and beyond.

With many of the key policy levers relevant for culture in the hands of local and regional governments, rather than national, there is a particular relevance in looking at the level of towns and cities for examples of how to realise the potential of culture.

Both in its own work, and through collaboration in the Culture 2030 Goal campaign, IFLA works to encourage good practices, in particular highlighting countries and cities which are taking the lead. One way of identifying these is through looking through documents such as Voluntary Local Reviews, and how far and in what way these talk about culture[1].

However, another is by looking at the take up, and results of programmes such as UNESCO's Creative Cities network, which brings together towns and cities globally that are focused on realising the potential of culture in building successful and sustainable communities. In particular, it is interesting to look at how far such programmes help ensure that libraries – as key parts of the cultural infrastructure of any community – are engaged and supported in delivering positive outcomes.

Based on a set of questions sent out to libraries in the members of UNESCO's Creative Cities Network focused on literature, this report offers initial ideas about how engagement in the network is helping libraries secure support and impact.

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[1] https://www.ifla.org/news/recognising-libraries-as-sdg-implementation-partners-in-2021-part-2-at-the-heart-of-local-delivery/

Background

The UNESCO Creative Cities Network (UCCN) dates back to 2004[2]. It has the goal to promote cooperation with and among cities that have identified creativity as a strategic factor for sustainable urban development. They commit to placing creativity at the heart of their planning, to strengthen the creation, production, distribution and dissemination of culture, to develop hubs of creativity and open opportunities for creators, to improve access and participation, and to cooperate internationally around.

Within the programme, there are seven different themes – music, film, design, folk arts, media arts, gastronomy, and crucially, literature, with 246 cities globally involved in the programme. There is an annual call for applicants, with each Member State allowed to submit up to four cities a year (across all categories). Cities must fill in an application form, demonstrating the current status of their investment in culture, and additional ideas for actions that they would carry out as a Creative City. Currently, applications for 2021 are under consideration, involving an expert committee.

The following cities are designated as Cities of Literature: Angoulême (France), Baghdad (Iraq), Barcelona (Spain), Beirut (Lebanon), Bucheon (Korea), Dublin (Ireland), Dunedin (New Zealand), Durban (South Africa), Edinburgh (Scotland), Exeter (United Kingdom), Granada (Spain), Heidelberg (Germany), Iowa City (United States of America), Krakow (Poland), Kuhmo (Finland), Lahore (Pakistan), Leeuwarden (Netherlands), Lillehammer (Norway), Ljubljana (Slovenia), Lviv (Ukraine), Manchester (United Kingdom), Melbourne (Australia), Milan (Italy), Montevideo (Uruguay), Nanjing (China), Norwich (England), Nottingham (England), Óbidos (Portugal), Odesa (Ukraine), Prague (Czech Republic), Quebec City (Canada), Reykjavik (Iceland), Seattle (United States), Slemani (Iraq), Tartu (Estonia), Ulyanovsk (Russian Federation), Utrecht (Netherlands), Wonju (South Korea) and Wroclaw (Poland).

A specific website[3] brings together information about the cities of literature and their activities, as well as links to their own websites, highlighting good examples of what they have achieved.

Library Involvement in City of Literature Bids and Management

A first way in which libraries can engage in Cities of Literature is by being engaged at the beginning. While the application form for 2021 does not specify libraries, it does ask for information about the infrastructure available for supporting creativity and access to culture, as well as the engagement of relevant actors.

As such, responses from Cities of Literatures highlighted the involvement of libraries in preparing bids, for example through offering support (Melbourne, Odessa, Angouleme), or as part of a coalition of organisation preparing bids (Lillehammer, Tartu, Krakow, Wroclaw).

Crucially, there are also cities where libraries have been the lead agencies in local government pushing for City of Literature status, as was the case in Prague and Dublin in particular, as well as Edinburgh and Kuhmo (where the library worked alongside an organisation focused on the Kalevala) in order to develop a bid.

This involvement makes sense – libraries are of course already strongly involved in literature promotion, and are often best placed to run programmes at the city level. They also often already have literature programming which can help make for a strong and exciting bid.

Once a bid has been successful, libraries often continue to engage closely. Indeed, in Dublin, Durban, Milan, Bucheon, Prague, and Seattle, City of Literature offices are run by or out of city library services, ensuring strong ongoing library involvement, alongside other partners.

Elsewhere, it may be trusts, charities or independent literary organisations which manage the programme, but often with strong library links, although respondents noted that this was not always the case. A key factor in engagement is likely to be ensuring that the director of libraries, or a representative, is involved in City of Literature planning, such as in Lillehammer.

Library-Related Projects in Cities of Literature and their Impacts

We asked about whether cities of literature had seen new or expanded projects which brought citizens into contact with libraries, ideally complementing exiting library budgets.

Very positively, in the case of Odesa, City of Literature status appeared to coincide with new investments in libraries, in particular for children.

Most responses focused on new activities. For example, engagement in City of Literature planning offered new possibilities for libraries to engage in wider literature-related programming, such as festivals or book fairs (Angouleme, Tartu), or to launch their own (Dublin, Krakow, Wroclaw). There have also been new book prizes (Dublin, Wroclaw, Krakow), as well as literary cafés (Tartu), and opportunities to build connections between writers and libraries (Angouleme, Dublin), serving to raise awareness of libraries and excitement about their offers. In Tartu, a key project was to give all 1st grade school students a library card in order to help them become familiar with libraries from a young age.

As well as events, City of Literature status has also seen work taken forwards on specific products, such as developing new databases and portals, including in foreign languages (Tartu, Krakow, Wroclaw), enabling the work of local libraries to reach a wider audience.

Another type of activity that can be directly attributed to the City of Literature designation is increased international collaboration with libraries in counterpart cities elsewhere. Book gifting projects were taking place, and there was a drive to think about how else to build awareness of partner city library services, as well as to share expertise and experiences.

In terms of the impacts of this work, respondents indicated a number of ways in which City of Literature status had helped.

A first impact was in terms of financial support for the work of libraries. In Prague, for example, the city council has been ready to fund new relevant projects, including residency programmes, providing a welcome boost to library programming. In Dublin, it has seen the city take on the costs of literary festivals and activities from private sponsors, ensuring their sustainability. Elsewhere, City of Literature status has offered a useful support for advocacy against cuts to library budgets, or had provided a useful label allowing for bigger projects to be advanced.

Beyond the financial aspect, there have also been dividends in terms of profile and prominence of libraries and their work. Highlighting library programming through City of Literature websites was seen as helping to raise engagement, as was the engagement of libraries in wider city promotion, with, for example, librarians from Lillehammer joining the Norwegian delegation at the Frankfurt Book Fair. In effect, City of Literature status acted as an amplifier of library initiatives.

Stronger communications and outreach also has the potential to raise wider citizen engagement in libraries, with Tartu seeing the bucking of a downward trend in lending to young people, potentially connected to efforts to bring them more regularly into libraries.

This higher profile also applied internally, with respondents noting that mayors appeared to value libraries and literature more highly following designation. Nonetheless, it was underlined that changes in attitudes could take time, and that there needed to be constant investment in City of Literature programming for there to be an effect.

Some respondents highlighted efforts to spread the benefits of City of Literature status, for example through partnerships with libraries in the wider region (Lillehammer).

Finally, as highlighted above, an impact of the status has been to create new contacts and networking opportunities, allowing for learning, and allowing for greater mobility of writers between cities (as in Dublin).

Looking Forwards

The City of Literature network is a strong and active one, with libraries playing an active role. The Cities work together to encourage others to join them, creating an ever wider pool of expertise and knowledge to draw on.

Respondents themselves suggested potential areas for future activity, including the development of specially tagged city of literature collections (including with its own catalogue heading, for example made up of books by local authors, which would then be prominently displayed within local libraries. These collections could subsequently be shared and promoted in other cities of literature – including in translation – in order

to encourage a sense of being part of a global network, as well as giving local writers in one place a much wider audience.

Other suggestions included promoting literary competitions between cities, connecting book groups, collaborating on genealogical research, and exchanging on how to create and provide access to heritage and digital content.

Conclusion

This report, based on around a dozen responses from libraries in Cities of Literature around the world, highlights not only the ways in which libraries can power and steer applications for and management of designations, but also open the door to new investments and activities.

The status has a potential, it seems, to give libraries an ever more central place not only in cultural policy, but in wider development planning and as a political priority. This brings the possibility of additional resources and stronger recognition, and new opportunities to reach out and engage with communities.

Moreover, it seems to open new horizons, with international collaboration options highlighted by a number of respondents as being an impact.

At the same time, it is also clear that the place of libraries within programming is not necessarily always a given, and that work is needed to ensure that our institutions continue to be at the heart of planning and delivery. Yet if libraries are able to commit the effort to helping build and manage bids, the results in terms of the reach and impact of connected library programmes appear to be strong.

Thanks to representatives of libraries in the following cities for their contributions: Angouleme, Dublin, Dunedin, Edinburgh, Krakow, Kuhmo, Lillehammer, Melbourne, Odesa, Prague, Tartu and Wroclaw.