



A COMPREHENSIVE ANALYSIS OF THE VALLETTA 2018 CULTURAL PROGRAMME

Daniela Blagojevic Vella

ABSTRACT

The research study sets out to investigate the strategies and practices currently in place to develop the Valletta 2018 Cultural Programme. The aim is to understand how the Valletta 2018 Foundation and various project leaders transfer their visions into objectives and how they work to create a balanced cultural offer, place the citizen at the centre and strive towards a European dimension.

The study observes a clear progress in the consolidation of the Cultural Programme with a range of projects across different disciplines included and confirmed for 2018. In particular, the information gathered shows an intensified drive towards contemporary projects, establishing international links and exploiting the Euro-Mediterranean dimension. The interviews and focus groups shed light on the different strategies in place and also the challenges encountered by the programme contributors. The interpretation of audience participation and engagement varies, ranging from grass-roots community projects to the large-scale events. However, the study also indicates that interviewees share a common vision of striving towards widening participation and with this a common concern that this requires ongoing efforts and the need to share best practices.

The implementation of projects at such a scale is largely unprecedented and capacity building, development, competences and skills are identified by respondents as necessary for the successful delivery of ECoC objectives. In particular, the study highlights the need for project leaders to understand the overarching objectives of the Valletta 2018 Cultural Programme beyond the aims of their individual project.

Keywords: Cultural Programme; audience participation; European dimension; cultural offer; audience engagement.

INTRODUCTION

Since 1985 the European Capital of Culture (ECoC) has become more than a high-profile cultural festival. Various ECoC studies and evaluations (Palmer/Rae (2004); García and Cox (2013); ECORYS) have shown how cities have increased their standards and ambitions beyond that of a year-long festival of activities.

The Valletta 2018 Foundation has also set an ambitious vision for its Cultural Programme that places cultural participation and citizens at the centre:

“The Cultural Programme that is being designed by the Valletta 2018 Foundation aims to reinforce citizen’s pride and self-esteem, allow for active participation, and develop initiatives that leave concrete and durable results leading to a citizenship that can affirm itself, generate international interest, and fully exploit the new or regenerated cultural infrastructure offered by the city” (Cremona, 2016, p. xii).

The ECoC Cultural Programme is a main element that needs to be assessed within a specific cultural context and in terms of the objectives set by the 2006 Decision No 1622/2006/EC¹. Article 4 stipulates that the ECoC should include two main criteria (i) European Dimension (ii) The City and Citizens.

The objective of this study is to analyse the creation of the Valletta 2018 Cultural Programme and the individual projects from development to implementation from 2015 to 2018. It sets out to identify the effectiveness of the Programme regarding the cultural offer, audience participation and European collaboration.

As shown in Figure 1, in 2015 the study started off by drawing upon previous evaluations of ECoC programmes and the Valletta 2018 Bid Book objectives to establish the elements and criteria against which to evaluate the Programme (see Annex I). The findings in the first year revealed the complexity of developing an ECoC programme and an ongoing refining of the vision and objectives by the Valletta 2018 Foundation. The first report showed how that the programming balance was in flux with a leaning towards a contemporary approach, a range of art forms and a focus on process-led projects rooted in Valletta and across Malta. The culture participation element was a priority in community projects led by the programming team while the development of the European dimension was still underdeveloped.

Building on these findings, in 2016 the research looked at how the programming and content were further consolidated and how the changes unfolded in the run-up towards ECoC. The 2015 study relied primarily on the institutional analysis while in 2016 the main focus was data gathering through in-depth interviews and focus groups. The study continued to investigate and fine-tune the following research questions:

1. How are the aims and objectives of the Valletta 2018 Cultural Programme being developed?
2. How is the Programme developed and devised?
3. What are the range and diversity of the cultural offer and programming balance?
4. How do the projects included in the Cultural Programme fulfil ECoC objectives on cultural participation? What strategies are being devised to engage audiences? What are the barriers to participation as perceived by the Cultural Programmers and creators?
5. How do the projects/events reflect the European Dimension?
6. What are the challenges encountered in the delivery of the Valletta 2018 Programme?

¹ Decision No 1622/2006/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of the 24 October 2006 establishing a Community action for the European Capital of Culture event for the years 2017 to 2019.

It should be emphasised from the outset that the 2016 findings are based on a Programme which is in progress and the full range of projects and events programme will be further established in 2017. The focus is, therefore, the planning stage and the projects which have been announced, developed and/or produced by December 2016. The development of the study is shown in Figure 1.

| Methodology | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 |
|------------------------|------|------|------|------|
| Institutional Analysis | X | | | X |
| Focus groups | X | X | X | X |
| In-depth interviews | X | X | X | X |
| Online questionnaire | | X | X | X |
| Project visits | | X | X | X |

Cultural Programme development:

Figure 1: Development of study from 2015 to 2018



The research examines three aspects of the Cultural Programme in line with the Foundation’s terms of reference. However, the effectiveness of the Cultural Programme is also dependent on various factors including governance and funding, infrastructure and communications².

² These aspects are being investigated through the Valletta 2018 Foundation Evaluation and Monitoring Research Plan.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study adopts a mixed method approach to reflect multi-dimensional aspects of the Cultural Programme and the developments unfolding over the years. Unlike studies that are post evaluation (ECORYS 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014), the ongoing evaluation implies that members of the research team can directly observe and survey the individual projects as they progress. Previous studies have noted the limitation of conducting interviews after the ECoC event because of the reliance on respondents' recollections and perceptions (ECORYS, 2014). This study has the advantage of analysing the Programme while it is still in progress.

In 2016, data was gathered primarily through in-depth interviews, focus groups as well as project visits. The interviews and focus group studies have been carried out with:

1. The Valletta 2018 Foundation team members and management including the Executive Director, Programme Coordinator and officers, Regional Coordinators, Strand Coordinators, Tal-Kultura Programme Manager;
2. Special events team including Production Coordinator, Line Producer and Executive Assistant.
3. Creators, Co-Creators and producers of projects included in the Cultural Programme;
4. Key persons from Public Cultural Organisations;
5. Independent artists and groups.

The interviews and focus groups were transcribed³ and coded according to themes and research questions namely (i) cultural offer and programming balance (ii) audience participation and engagement (iii) European collaboration.

In the first year of study, it was established that ongoing updates are necessary to ensure that the research findings are up-to-date and reflect the ongoing changes. Consultation meetings with the Programme Coordinator Margerita Pulè were organised regularly to ensure that the developments were tracked throughout the year.

The study attempts to achieve reliability by triangulating the data collected from the institutional analysis, interviews, focus groups and project visits. This methodology is adequate to gain detailed and in-depth perspectives on the ECoC Cultural Programme. However, in-depth interviews have their limitations particularly because of biases by both the interviewees and interviewers (Blagojevic, 2015). As identified in the first year of the study, caution is needed so as not to take personal interpretations for granted because of what Tinic refers to as the "situatedness" (Caldwell, 2008, p.8). In personal interviews, it may sometimes be difficult to filter through the self-promotion. Caldwell (2008) invites production studies researchers to sift through the personal branding and industry parlance (p. 318).

Moreover, studies on events commissioned by event organisers also tend to focus on positive aspects and neglect other critical aspects or do not focus sufficiently on social impact (Richards, 2013). To address this difficulty the research attempts to gather data from a variety of sources to widen its scope to include more critical perspectives.

³ Full recording and transcripts can be accessed on <https://transcribepro.wreally.com/docs>

As the Programme range continues to grow, particularly in 2018 once Valletta launches the full official Programme, it may difficult to conduct project visits and in-person project visits of all the projects. A number of project leaders and artists are not based in Malta and this also creates difficulties to conduct in-person interviews and to reach all those contributing to the Programme. Moreover, in some cases, respondents may be unwilling or hesitant to disclose all information and opinions.

To address these methodological difficulties, an online survey for project leaders will be conducted in 2017 as an additional methodological tool to ensure coverage of a wide-range of projects happening in 2018. Other studies (ECORYS 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014; Quinn & O'Halloran, 2006) have also used online surveys to ensure a wider response from ECoC contributors. The online questionnaire method will also be used in 2018 to reach the large number of contributors and artists and to investigate how audience participation strategies were implemented. The research can, therefore, evaluate the progress from the planning phase to the actual execution of the Programme.

FINDINGS

Research Question 1. How are aims and objectives of the Valletta 2018 Cultural Programme being developed?

ECoC evaluations of previous editions, particularly after 2005, indicate that hosts are setting wider ambitions with cultural, economic and social objectives included. Studies show that in most cases, core objectives remain the same at the application stage and the implementation phase. However, the reworking of goals for practical reasons was also observed (Garcia & Cox, 2013).

The interviews with different members of the Valletta 2018 Foundation throughout the year show that the intended objectives remain consistent with those proposed in the Bid Book. The objectives outlined by over 15 respondents include the following: (i) The focus on improving access to culture and the arts; (ii) Capacity building and opportunities for artists; (iii) Contributing to the development of quality projects; (iv) Legacy to ensure that outcomes continue beyond 2018.

The citizen element and cultural participation emerged as common priorities for the Programming team, as aptly summarised by one of the Valletta 2018 programme officers "there is a mission to make art and culture relevant to people and to their everyday lives and not just as a tourist attraction."

The independent artists interviewed, were also aware of the main ECoC objectives. Legacy and capacity building of artists emerged as priorities. However, most interviewees agreed that they were more concerned with the specific objectives of their own project and were less aware of the general themes and overarching objectives linking the different Cultural Programme projects and events. Moreover, some respondents said that they did not know which projects had been included in the Cultural Programme and suggested that there should be initiatives that bring contributors together to discuss their projects. They also recommended the use of communication and social media tools to remind them about ongoing ECoC initiatives and events. The Foundation acted upon this recommendation by organising a meet-up for all artists, artistic directors, programmers and project leaders in October 2016. During this activity, ECoC contributors introduced their projects and objectives to each other.

Research Question 2. How is the Programme developed and devised?

The Foundation's Programming team is responsible for the Cultural Programme, while the Artistic Director of Special Events Mario Philip Azzopardi and his team are responsible for the large flagship events including the opening ceremony, the Valletta Pageant of the Seas, the opera and the final event.

In January 2016, the EU Commission Monitoring and Advisory Panel report concluded that there was a clear progress concerning the Programme definition. The research confirms that in 2016 there was constant progress in establishing the projects to be included in the 2018 Programme and by the end of the year over 60 projects were included in the Programme.

Projects are being tested and developed so that more ambitious events can then feature in 2018 and over 25 projects were piloted or developed throughout 2016. These projects are process led in that they are being developed from now and will then be fully implemented in 2018. Even the flagship event the Valetta Pageant of the Seas was piloted in June 2016 and this was considered by the organisers as an opportunity to explore the effectiveness of the project in particular audience engagement strategies and logistics required as the

event features regatta boats, yachts, power boats and carnival floats. While most projects will be further developed and improved, other initiatives produced in 2015 and 2016 as Valletta 2018 projects will not be showcased further and other projects were specifically designed as short-term projects⁴.

In identifying projects that would form part of the 2018 Programme, the Foundation adopted a flexible approach - in some cases, the Foundation would be approached by artists who presented their projects while in other cases the Foundation would develop an idea or theme and then contact experts and artists working in that particular field. The management of the Programme also involves adapting to change as projects can develop differently to what was originally proposed.

Part of the process in 2016 was for the Programming team to identify gaps to ensure that the range and reach of the Programme are effective. ECoC presents an opportunity to implement cultural activities that have a wider reach and are more innovative, as will be discussed in the next section.

Research Question 3. What is the range and diversity of the cultural offer and programming balance?

Palmer/Rae (2004) identify various elements that influence the range and balance of the Cultural Programme including the size, scale and range of different genres. This study includes these elements as outlined in the question design (Annex 1) and the project visit form (Annex 2). The range of projects included in the Valletta 2018 Programme will continue to grow over the next year, with the full range of events launched in 2018.

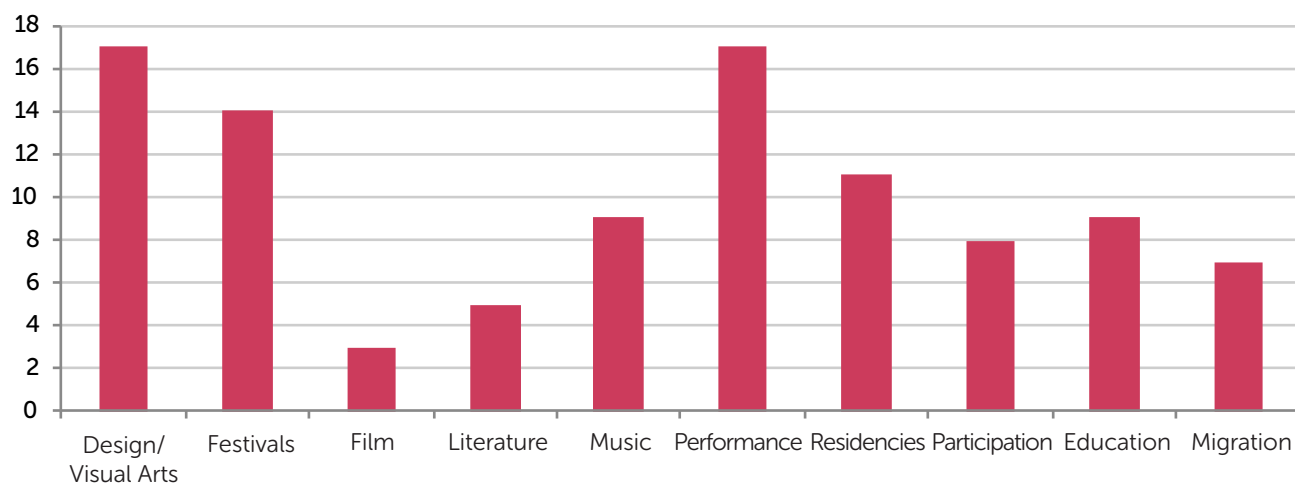
The Foundation manages its programme by loosely grouping the projects according to genre or type with a coordinator responsible for each strand. Figure 2 shows the distribution of projects according to strands as defined by the Foundation to date. The categorisation is made either by the type of artistic discipline or by the theme (e.g. exile/migration) or by the type of target group and interaction with the audience (e.g. education, participation). In interpreting this table, it is important to observe that there are clear overlaps, for example, a project may be categorised as 'participation' but at the same time it belongs to a particular art form like dance or theatre. Moreover, many projects are interdisciplinary and explore different themes and approaches. The strands are therefore useful to help in the internal management of the Programme and to ensure that there are various projects covering different elements.

Interviews conducted at the beginning of the year indicated that the theatre and dance disciplines were underrepresented at that point in time. This was due to the challenge of finding Maltese companies with the required experience to produce a large-scale project by 2018, given that a project of this scale is largely unprecedented in the local context. As can be seen in Figure 2 which shows the distribution of projects as at December 2016, the Programming team addressed this difficulty by establishing international links with performance and dance producers so that the Programme now includes more projects in this area. There is a clear focus on visual arts and design while theatre, film and literature are less represented. There is no strand dedicated to crafts and heritage suggesting that there will not be many projects from these sectors in 2018 or that these will be integrated as part of other projects in other categories.

Regarding Programming balance, the interviews and project visits also confirmed a drive towards contemporary and innovative projects. For the Executive Director Karsten Xuereb, Valletta 2018 cannot just be a reflection of the past but it is crucial to challenge ideas of what it means to be Maltese, Mediterranean and European in contemporary society.

⁴ Productions that will not be part of the 2018 programme include Bewildered Music Festival, Culture of Ageing, Haġa u Taħdita, Pjazza fi Pjazza and Storyworks.

Figure 2 Project range according to strand as categorised by the Foundation, December 2016



Research Question 4. How do the projects included in the Cultural Programme fulfil ECoC objectives on cultural participation?

The study looks at the Cultural Programme and how it is shaped with the needs of audiences and particular target groups in mind. As described in the previous section, one strand is identified as ‘participation’ in the programme categorization. In 2015 and early 2016, this strand was referred to as the community strand and this category deals mainly with grassroots projects targeting particular groups and adopting an active participation and co-creation approach.

In 2016, the Foundation estimates that over 150,000⁵ people took part in activities and projects related to Valletta 2018. These events include the Valletta Green Festival, the Valletta Pageant of the Seas and Notte Bianca⁶. All projects included in the Programme include a participatory element, either in terms of passive participation or active participation. Both approaches are important for the Foundation. The large-scale events focus on attracting large numbers while other projects particularly those in the participation and education strands are aimed at providing experiences and deepening relationships with audiences. Projects like Sounds Out Loud, Darba Wahda, Kanta Kantun, Ġewwa Barra and Naqsam il-Muza are examples of projects adopting this approach in 2016. Project leaders of such projects have emphasised the importance of focusing on the quality of relationships build with participants rather than the quantity of people attending a particular workshop or performance.

The large events are being developed to attract large audiences. Nonetheless, the Valletta Pageant of the Seas also involved the active participation of different communities and the organisers described the enthusiasm of various groups contributing to the event and the important role played by the Regional Coordinators.

Programmers, project leaders and artists interviewed shared a common concern that reaching out to audiences is not without difficulty and that increasing audience participation requires a significant cultural change. Culture Programme initiatives may not be relevant to all communities and artists have sometimes encountered a lack of enthusiasm. The lack of motivation by potential audiences was reiterated in interviews with various project leaders. Some target groups may be particularly difficult to

⁵ <http://valletta2018.org/news/valletta-2018-encourages-participation-in-its-2017-cultural-programme>

⁶ This does not include the New Year’s Eve event which was attended by approximately 75,000 people (Department of Information Press release, January 2017: <http://valletta2018.org/news/valletta-2018-encourages-participation-in-its-2017-cultural-programme>)

reach for practical reasons. For example, the participation of children in community projects outside school hours proved to be challenging as in the case of the Darba Wahda first workshop in Kirkop. In this project, various strategies and efforts were observed including the involvement of the Local Council, the use of posters and flyers, promotion on the project's social media page, presentations at Day Care centres and the provision of transport for participants. Nonetheless securing the participation of citizens needs ongoing efforts and collaboration with stakeholders.

The role of the Foundation, the Regional Coordinators and the volunteers is crucial in assisting small independent producers to engage with audiences and garner support from various stakeholders such as local councils and public institutions.

In 2016, the launch of the Tal-Kultura volunteers programme and the work of the Regional Coordinators showed a strategic effort to reach out to different target groups and to involve civil society in February 2016. The Tal-Kultura programme (co-managed with SOS Malta) was formally launched to a positive response with around 385 volunteers signing up. The aim of the programme goes beyond the recruitment of volunteers as helpers. In the words of the Tal-Kultura Programme Manager JD Farrugia, the Tal-Kultura programme "is first of all giving people the opportunity to take ownership of the Cultural Programme and to take ownership of Valletta 2018...whether it's just as a citizen who has no direct involvement in the sector or whether it's people who are studying or incoming artists or performers, they can all use the volunteering programme to get involved and network". The volunteering programme also has the ambition of exploring how a network of volunteers can work efficiently.

Throughout the year the Regional Coordinators also stepped up their role and are now helping the Foundation to understand the needs of different locations and to address gaps in the Programme. Currently, the Programming team is carrying out an exercise to understand the gaps in reaching various localities across Malta to ensure a wider reach. The Regional Coordinators are also identifying the different target groups across the five regions.

Research Question 5. How do the project/events reflect the European Dimension?

A major shift was observed in 2016 preparations showing a more outward-looking approach and emphasis on the international dimension. The appointment of Airan Berg as International Artistic Advisor largely contributed to this development and increased the focus on establishing international links. An International Officer was also engaged early in 2016 as part of the Programming team in this area.

Throughout the year, the Programming team deliberately sought to explore European connections and the new Programme content attests to this. The Programming Coordinator and other members of the team travelled to various festivals and more links were created through these visits. The Cultural Programme now includes more European elements either through the participation of artists or through links made by Maltese artists with wider networks.

Another development in 2016 included the international call and the selection of the Austrian curator Maren Richter to lead The Sea Our Neighbour project. The Design Cluster was accepted as a new BEDA member (Bureau of European Design Associations) and was invited by the EU-Japan Fest Committee

for an exploratory visit to Tokyo. International professionals also participated in training projects such as Storyworks and the Curatorial School. There are also a number of Malta-based international artists who are already attached to projects or coordinating individual strands of the Programme. The projects under the migration strand also contribute significantly to the international dimension. Increasingly Valletta 2018 is driving its emphasis on the Euro-Mediterranean aspect and Malta's unique geographical position. Project leaders were asked by the Foundation to propose ways in which their individual projects can create international links and, as observed by interviewees, this needed to be followed up further so that more projects could create international links. Moreover interviewees urged the Foundation to create links and contacts that can be sustained beyond 2018.

For the Foundation's Executive Director, the European Dimension is also about making the Cultural Programme relevant to other Europeans by ensuring that the various themes resonate with and are relevant to international audiences.

Research Question 6. What are the challenges encountered in the delivery of the Valletta 2018 Programme?

The members of the Foundation highlighted challenges in finding the right professionals to work on projects and to ensure the successful delivery of the Programme. Finding professionals who are available for the next two years is proving to be difficult, however this is a challenge that is not exclusive to Valletta 2018 and has been faced by most other ECoCs. Respondents, both Foundation representatives and artists, highlighted the need for capacity building, development of knowledge, competences and skills. These challenges reflect changes in the Maltese arts sector but are particularly pronounced as the ECoC approaches and the need for greater professionalism in the culture industry becomes more apparent. As articulated in several interviews, many view the ECoC process as one that should lead to a change in mind-sets and improved quality standards in the arts.

Another challenge identified last year (Blagojevic, 2015) and voiced again this year by respondents, is the implementation of effective strategies to attract and engage audiences. In this area, there is a need firstly for all contributors to understand the overall objectives of the Cultural Programme and to share best practices on reaching and engaging audiences. Interviewees spoke of the need for a forum to debate and strategise around the issues faced by cultural players. There is a need for contributors to better understand the over-arching Valletta 2018 vision and how the work of individual artists or groups is contributing to these wider objectives. The need for more communication amongst Programme contributors throughout the implementation of the Programme was reiterated throughout.

Beyond the actual development of the Programme, the focus groups generated debates on the challenges faced by independent artists in Malta. The concerns included the lack of resources and accessibility to public institutions. The artists interviewed also saw the Foundation's role in facilitating relationships with both cultural stakeholders and audiences.



CONCLUSIONS & WAY FORWARD

The development of the Programme throughout 2016 shows a clear push towards international projects. The Foundation is now establishing new relationships with stakeholders from across Europe and the Mediterranean. The programme has been further consolidated so it is now more clear which projects will be produced in 2018 while others will not be developed further. The main challenge to be tackled over the next months is to ensure that the right professionals are brought in to support the Programming team's efforts. The understanding of a common vision and the sharing of information by all Programme contributors is also being highlighted as a priority for the coming year.

The study will continue to follow this progress and in February 2017, an online questionnaire will be sent to the producers of around 50 projects that are planned for this year. The project visits are expected to increase as the projects which were in planning or research phase will now be produced in 2017. The 3 focus groups will be organised in the second quarter of 2017 and the in-depth interviews and project visits will be organised throughout the whole year up until the end of November before the compilation of the final report.

The focus groups can also be used as opportunity to bring programmers and producers together to workshop ideas related to the Cultural Programme. Now that the Cultural Programme has been further consolidated, the study should also investigate the extent to which the contributors are extending their artistic ambitions and audience participation strategies as a result of ECoC.

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