

Regional development, culture and border

The case of Mons2015

Fabienne Leloup and Oana Marina Panait

In 2015, Mons was designated a European Capital of Culture (ECOC). This title is one of the instruments that the municipality had included in its economic restructuring programme, which was implemented in the early 2000s. The UNESCO labelling of a set of local tangible and intangible heritages is another example of instruments used for this purpose. What is the impact of this European cultural title on the city trajectory and, when considering Mons' geographical location – the city is only 16 km away from the Franco-Belgian border – has this trajectory included a cross-border (re) positioning?

After outlining how Mons has included culture in its regional development programme and how the ECOC title has supported this strategy, we will present a first assessment of Mons2015 results for the year 2015 and beyond. ("Mons2015" is the term used for Mons in 2015 when Mons was designated as one of the two ECOCs.)

We will then discuss the border issue. The ECOC title is always given to city located in a predetermined country. However, the programmes of several capitals have crossed national borders, such as Lille 2004 and Luxembourg 2007. What has Mons2015 taught us about cross-border issues?

We conclude with some thoughts about the cultural development currently implemented in Mons and in its surrounding areas.

Regional development

Mons, including its merged surrounding cities, is a Belgian Walloon municipality of nearly 100,000 inhabitants, located in the province of Hainaut, near the French border.

Like the French side of the border, Mons experienced industrial prosperity based on coal mining until the 1960s, but has since suffered from a long-term economic decline. The European Regional Development Funds (ERDFs) have supported the social and economic restructuring and urban

regeneration of the region, including creative and cultural investments since the 1990s (Leloup and Moyart, 2014).

In the 2000s, the municipality built its urban development plan on three pillars: culture (Mons is the official cultural capital of Wallonia, as Charleroi is its social capital), tourism, and information and communication technologies (ICT). This strategy was decided upon in order to improve the attractiveness of the city, both for tourists and investors. In 2002, the local cultural organisations were reformed and included in a unique cultural centre, the so-called "Le Manège.mons". This centre was the twin institution of the cultural structure of Maubeuge, a nearby French city on the other side of the border, the so-called "national scene of the Manège". Cooperation and partnerships between the cities commenced.

In terms of ICT, Mons saw the arrival of various companies specialising in digital technologies and creative economy, including start-ups in the areas of video games (Fishing Cactus), slow motion cameras (I-Movix), applications for Apple (Creaced) and applications related to voice recognition (A Capella) (CSEF et al, 2013).

Lastly, the city started a huge campaign for international recognition of its heritage. Its baroque Belfry (1999), the Saint Georges' folk combat (the so-called combat of "Doudou") (2005) (within a consortium of "Processional Giants and Dragons of Belgium and France") and the Universal Bibliographic Repertory of the Mundaneum in the "International Memory of the World Register" programme (2013) were indeed recognised by UNESCO as part of the World Heritage Sites. Extending the scope to a radius of 15 kilometres around Mons led to the inclusion of four other heritages acknowledged by UNESCO: the hydraulic boat lifts of the old "Canal du Centre", the Neolithic flint mines of Spiennes, the carnival of Binche, and the series of four major mining sites. The UNESCO titles thus led to the city being positioned on the Belgian and international tourist scenes (UNESCO, 2019).

Lille's policy and its designation as ECOC for 2004 initiated the Mons bid for the ECOC title, and Mons was involved in a set of activities co-organised with Lille2004. Mons Mayor Elio Di Rupo, informed that Belgium had to host the ECOC in 2015, put this bid on the city's cultural agenda and Mons was finally – after Liège's withdrawal – the only Belgian city to apply in 2009 (Leloup and Moyart, 2014).

The theme chosen for the one-year programme was "When Technology meets Culture" and, as early as 2009, the city implemented an event policy, by exhibiting Keith Haring and Andy Warhol at the recently renovated Fine Arts Museum.

Assessment of the situation

Mons2015 had to be a high point in the city's renovation policy; it precisely concretised the revitalisation of the city's image and therefore its attractiveness (CSEF et al, 2013). Consequently, the communication strategy was a central element: it is therefore not surprising that, as early as December 2014, CNN Travel ranked Mons second in its ranking of the 10 most attractive cities for 2015, after Milan (the organiser of the world exposition Expo 2015) (Leloup and Moyart, 2018).

Four artists, all related to the region, formed the foundation of the one-year cultural programme: Verlaïne, Roland de Lassus, Saint Georges and Van Gogh. In addition to the events associated with these figures, other festivities, activities and celebrations were located in the city, in the Borinage – the mining and rural surroundings of the central city – and in the partner cities.

Various ex-ante and ex-post analyses and evaluations were conducted: two ex-ante monitoring reports before 2015 (The Monitoring and Advisory Panel for the European Capital of Culture 2015, 2012 and 2014) and an ex-post evaluation by the European Commission (2016), an assessment developed by KEA Consulting (KEA, 2016) and a report produced by Mons (Charle, n.d.).

Let us recall, as indicated by the study carried out for the European Parliament's Committee on Culture and Education (Garcia et al, 2013), that few ECOCs have the data to assess the medium-term and long-term impacts of their events. The figures often include redundant elements and an explicitly explanatory capacity often misses due to aggregate criteria (Leloup and Moyart, 2018).

The first figures suggested a multiplier of 1 euro invested against 4 euros of impacts (estimates made by KEA Consulting, commissioned by the Mons2015 Foundation) (KEA, 2016). The figures cover both tickets sold and free tickets (ibid).

In terms of audience, 2,182,622 people visited Mons: 180,000 went to Van Gogh's exhibition, 100,000 attended the opening ceremony, and 80,000 were present at events outside the city ("Le Grand Huit" and "Le Grand Ouest"). During 2015, 21,000 tourists or residents visited Van Gogh's house, 116,500 went to Mons museums, 38,000 went up in the Belfry tower and about 16,000 attended other events (European Commission, 2016). The city experienced an increase in international tourists, coming mainly from neighbouring countries: the figure of about 250,000 international visitors was thus estimated (KEA, 2016).

According to the European Commission evaluation (2016), it is difficult to determine how many visitors were newcomers or attended Mons2015

because of the ECoC title. However, the municipality certainly attracted a large variety of people, including children and the youth, the elderly, socio-economically disadvantaged or disabled individuals, and minority ethnic groups. These groups, especially the socio-economically disadvantaged and minority groups, received free entry into events; specific accommodations ensured accessibility for disabled people. Some specific activities were organised for these groups. With regard to minority groups, Mons2015 promoters focused mainly on the European and Mediterranean minority groups living in Mons, such as Italians, Poles, Ukrainians, Russians, Algerians, Moroccans, Tunisians and Turks (*ibid*).

Mons2015 hosted more than 300 events between January and December 2015. Various outdoor creations, open-air ceremonies and events reinvested the public space (Charle, n.d.).

The ECoC organisers forged multiple collaborations with various partners, including Belgian cultural associations, European and international organisations (eg coming from Canada, Japan, China) and French cities. All of this strengthened cultural collaborations (KEA, 2016).

Evaluation reports indicated that around 450 international journalists covered Mons2015 and more than 30,000 international papers, in addition to international radio and television stations, mentioned Mons2015.

The data collected by the European Commission noted a positive impact of the ECoC title on the city's image outside Belgium. There were, however, indications of a less important evolution within Belgium (European Commission, 2016). The most significant positive impact was on the local resident population (European Commission, 2016). When the figures of the previous years are taken into account, in 2015 Mons2015 attracted almost 16 times more Flemish visitors, increasing from 263 in 2014 to 4,191 visitors in 2015 (Kea, 2016).

As noted elsewhere (Leloup and Moyart, 2014), the assessment has to distinguish between situational benefits, linked to prestigious and unique events, and structural achievements. The latter achievements include the opening of the Doudou Museum, the Artothèque, and the Arsonic (a concert hall), the reopening of the Belfry and the Mons Memorial Museum (all partly co-financed by EDRFs), and even the erection of a Libeskind convention centre and a Calatrava station, still unfinished in 2019. The outstanding infrastructure that was (re)opened in 2015 has enhanced the city's appeal up to the present.

With regard to the ECoC objective, the European ex-post evaluation showed that Mons2015 fostered the implementation of a "more extensive, more innovative and more European in nature" cultural programme compared with previous ones (European Commission, 2016, p. 52). Out of 219 projects developed, only a minority existed previously, while most were in-

novative. New artworks were created by famous contemporary artists, such as the choral piece written by Jean-Paul Dessys – a Walloon composer and musician – but the local population was also promoted, as illustrated by the book "Mons à petits pas", which was co-written by 48 children (European Commission, 2016).

Some projects were developed in order to create conviviality and social contacts and to establish meeting and exchange places (eg "Le Jardin Suspendu" and "Café Europa") (KEA, 2016). Fashion, design, musical, gastronomic and literary events took place there (Charle, n.d.).

The ECoC sponsors promoted the local cultural heritage and specificities existing in the city and in its surroundings and reinforced the European and international scope. The link between international artists – such as Van Gogh – and the municipality helped to make the cultural heritage more noticeable for foreign visitors and also for the local population. This link gave Mons and the Borinage surroundings an international visibility (European Commission, 2016).

Mons has made its mark on the European cultural map thanks to Mons2015. The planned establishment of biennales intend to maintain the city's cultural visibility. Mons held its first biennale in 2018–2019 (Mons Capitale Culturelle, 2019). This will help to ensure Mons' ongoing attractiveness as a local and international cultural and tourist destination.

The border

The selection of European Capitals of Culture is conducted according to country. A calendar determines which European member states are eligible. This national affiliation is the first condition. (A very new framework makes it possible for a city in an EU or EFTA candidate country to hold the title) (European Commission, 2019). For example, in 2025 it will be Germany's turn to host the ECoC (*ibid*). Six years before the year of the title, the selected member states publish a call for applications. Mons was chosen when it was Belgium's turn, as was Lille when it was France's turn.

In spatial terms, the projects proposed often extend beyond municipal boundaries – and this is even encouraged by the European Commission. When the situation warrants it, an ECoC may cross national borders. This was the case in Lille2004 and in Luxembourg2007.

Other cities or regions can be associated with the designated ECoC in the form of partnerships. The network will widen the space covered by the ECoC. The places may or may not be geographically close, they may or may not be in the same country, and they take advantage of the partnerships to make visible their own cultural activities and to promote the ECoC agenda.

Extending to other contiguous areas can also broaden the audience base. In the cross-border case, this objective often requires a specific targeted awareness and information phase. Even if European internal borders are open and not physically marked, they can be thought of barriers that prevent people from crossing them even though there is little distance to be covered. Removing these barriers can be planned during the ECoC year, and also for later on.

For territorial reasons, some ECoCs may include a wider region than the city, and they may possibly include a cross-border section. This may be justified by historical reasons (same languages, same traditions), a desire for diversity or, more pragmatically, the need for a pooling of equipment, staff or expertise.

All the circumstances led to extending the reach of the Mons ECoC. France is located close by: the first village is 16 km away; Maubeuge, a city of more than 30,000 inhabitants, is 27 km away and Valenciennes, a city of nearly 40,000 inhabitants, is 36 km away. This situation is reinforced by the flagship position of Lille, which is only 80 km away. From an organisational perspective, the city's cultural institution, "Le Manège.mons", had partnered with the Maubeuge structure, "the national scene of the Manège", since 2002. They planned a common cultural agenda as well as bus transport facilities between the cities, plus other types of exchanges. Several European Interreg programs, such as Interreg IV (2012), supported this Franco-Belgian partnership.

However, the assessment of the cross-border impact shows that the results were weak. Mons2015 was based on several partnership circles, but the French cross-border municipalities (Lille, Valenciennes and Maubeuge) were positioned in the same way as the Dutch border cities are positioned, in a more transnational rather than a cross-border perspective. None of the activities was labelled as cross-border. France, as a whole, emerged as a partner. It was only by defining the priority target audience, "150 km in Belgium and in the French border region", that the project explicitly mentioned the other side of the border (Charle, n.d., p. 43).

The only reference to a cross-border partner concerned Lille. It was the first of the eight cities of the "Ailleurs" project with Melbourne or Plzen (the other ECoC in 2015), and a collective of artists from Lille exhibited an artwork among the urban installations that decorated the city.

Finally, let us note that, as of early 2016, the dissolution of the "Manège.mons" institution due to management problems erased all signs of a partnership between the institutional structures and the bridges between the cultural life of Maubeuge and Mons. A new structure was established, called "Mars-Mons arts de la scène". It is clearly positioned in the heart of the city where the six performance sites that it manages are located. A recentralisation of the cultural organisation in Mons is thus clear.

Some prospects

In the aftermath of Mons2015, the city of Hainaut has undoubtedly achieved its visibility objectives. The museum centre, the so-called "pôle muséal", coordinates 12 sites located in and around Mons (Pôle muséal, 2019). The Mons2025 Foundation, heir to the Mons2015 Foundation, plays a key role in the network of European Capitals of Culture, and acts as an ambassador for the cultural activities of Mons on an international scale. In collaboration with the museum centre and "Mars Mons arts de la scène", the Foundation co-organises the biennales. The first version in 2018–2019 opened with its exhibition on Niki de Saint Phalle, which was a huge success. The Foundation also promotes local cultural activities such as "Le Grand Huit" and "La Grande Clameur" (Fondation Mons2025, 2019).

Mons has kept a logo that is similar to the Mons2015 logo, as well as a website – <http://www.monscapitaleculturelle.eu> – which continues its cultural ambitions at the European level.

Finally, in terms of borders, we can note that, even if improving Franco-Belgian dynamics is no longer a priority, the Mons cultural strategy since 2015 has helped to remove the Flemish border, which is good news for the attractiveness of Mons when we consider that Flanders accounts for a third of Wallonia's tourist overnight stays (Wallonie Tourisme CGT, 2017, p. 38).

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Time and Networks

WROCLAW as European Capital of Culture 2016

Katarzyna Mlynczak-Sachs

I would like to start this article by expressing my enormous enthusiasm for the European Capital of Culture. Personally, participating in this project was a fascinating adventure, in which a huge amount of planning and work resulted in the satisfaction of meeting great people and making big ideas come true. At the back of my head, I constantly felt a huge responsibility to successfully present the city and its inhabitants. If anyone has a chance to get involved in this project, I would encourage them to do so. There are many different possible forms of involvement – from creating artworks to culture management, from public services and volunteering to business support.

In this article, I would like to share my opinion and experience gained during Wrocław European Capital of Culture 2016 and combine it with facts and figures gathered by researchers representing various domains of applied social sciences. The selected aspects are aligned with the motto chosen by Wrocław to promote itself during the celebration of the European Capital of Culture (ECOC): "Spaces for Beauty". The aim was to "create open, dynamic, and friendly spaces that will serve the human craving for communion with art and culture. We are guided by a desire to establish the presence of beauty in social and personal lives. We intend to create spaces within which to restore the presence of beauty in public life and in daily habits" (Spaces for Beauty, Revised, 2011, p. 14). The idea of public space has acquired greater significance in the past twenty years due to its associations with many aspects, ranging from architecture to human relations and the expression of freedom.

Thus I would like to concentrate in this text on the impact of Wrocław ECOC 2016 on three areas: the creation of Wrocław as a cultural centre by improving its infrastructure, the participation of residents in culture and the development of international network, and interest in the city as such.

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