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How cultural Third Places affect urban development in the European Capital of Culture region of Esch2022

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Abstract

The European Capital of Culture Esch2022 will take place in the cross-border area that includes the southern region of Luxembourg as well as some French municipalities of Lorraine located on the border with the Grand Duchy. One of the key projects of this ECoC is to define a series of “cultural third places” whose main objective is to favour urban regeneration policies through cultural development. The goal of this research is to approach the role of third places as a tool to deepen the ties between communities and spaces located in European borderlands. Based on the analysis of strategic cultural planning policies across the border followed by interviews with key stakeholders from the area, we come to the conclusion that the building-up of third places to connect people and space across the border can have different meanings depending on authorities and strategic planning scales.

Introduction

While the Coronavirus pandemic still continues to disturb the execution of Galway’s and Rijeka’s agenda for the 2020 “European Capital of Culture”, preparations for future ECoCs are in progress. This is the case for the ECoC 2022 Esch/Alzette in Luxembourg. The area that is spotlighted with this nomination combines the Southern municipalities of the Luxembourg PRO-SUD region - with Esch/Alzette as the largest urban centre - and the northern municipalities of the French Lorraine included into the CCPHVA urban partnership (see Map 1). The territory of this ECoC is located in a broader cross-border urban region which is characterized by the daily commuting of 200,000 Belgian, French and German residents who head mainly towards the agglomeration of Luxembourg-City, which is located 20 kilometres away from Esch/Alzette (Statec, 2019). The Esch2022 area is both an area of transit for the vast majority of France-based commuters working in Luxembourg and a French-Luxembourgish periphery where nation-state authorities have invested economic capital to create a new urban centrality balancing the dominance of Luxembourg City (Lamour and Durand, 2019).

Map. 1 The cultural third places of Esch2022



Authors: Schulz Niklas, Skoczylas Konrad, LISER, 2020

Cartographic sources for administrative boundaries: Eurogeographics

The cross-border candidacy of Esch2022 is an element of a broader integrative project aiming at securing this localized cross-border polarisation. One key element of this candidacy is the launch and mobilisation of “third places” (Oldenburg, 1999) which means places that aim to secure interactions between cultural stakeholders and residents in a regenerated city area. However, what can the analysis of these places tell us about their function to bring together people and areas located in two different states? Following a review of the literature on “third places” and the different visions of these locations in space, the research hypothesis and methodology are presented. The results of our research are structured into three parts. Firstly, we pay attention to third places as a tool to intensify connections across the borders among cultural stakeholders. Secondly, we approach these places as an instrument to regenerate a local and shared territory across the border. Lastly, we look at the potential of these places to determine a new upper-scale regional integration beyond state borders.

Third Place: The cultural turn and its multi-scalar understanding

The concept of “third place” has been defined by Ray Oldenburg (1999). It is based on a series of criteria, which are generally limited to what is happening inside of them such as the types of interactions that are favoured and their informal dimension. Third places are “a home away from home” (Oldenburg, 1999: 38). It is nearly characterized by a familiar sense of belonging (Sleeman, 2012). Third Places have been exemplified as mostly ordinary sites such as cafés, English pubs or a commercial street. Today, the definition has been developed in a more distinctive way. Third places compound a traditional office and a café. They thus combine the informal social side and the formal and productive side of a new professional culture favouring coworking environments and the co-presence of people belonging to different social groups (Brown, 2017, Besson, 2017).

These third places, which can be named “coworking spaces”, “living labs” or “fab labs”, have become a central tool for spatial planning authorities to regenerate the urban space in which they are located (Brown, 2017; Merkel, 2015). They are often conceived as a way to transform deprived areas into thriving/trendy neighbourhoods with a potential risk of gentrification and re-bordering of the social space in the city. Nevertheless, social inclusion imperatives can be presented as an objective of third places and especially so in third places focused on cultural

activities (Gallet, 2015). The impact of cultural third places on the urban space is multi-scalar. It can lead to a local transformation, but it can also determine a new re-organisation of spatial functions at the regional scale. Third places can be locations favouring a polycentric organisation of the regional urban spaces (Buisson et al., 2001) thanks to the connections between stakeholders in charge of them and the flows of people and artists they can generate at the regional scale and across administrative boundaries. Cultural third places can be promoted in the framework of ECoC. However, it is rather unknown how these new urban spots can help to intensify connections between Europeans residing in different states and whether it is an element favouring a European spatial inclusion.

Hypothesis, methodology and context

It is argued that cultural “third places” promoted by ECoC can reveal the complexity of the European integration process and especially, the difficulty to imagine a governance favouring this integration across state borders. The definition of third places can show potential differences concerning the usefulness of partnerships across state borders despite shared visions and assets in the same cross-border context.

The research is based on two qualitative-oriented methods in the Esch2022 ECoC which is located in between two states and includes both French and Luxembourgish municipalities. At first, it was necessary to explore a series of reports presenting the strategies carried out by the public stakeholders concerning the development of cultural third places in the two countries. Second, a series of semi-directive interviews with these stakeholders have been conducted. They belong to the cultural sector, but also to the spatial planning located in the Esch2022 area where seven cultural third places can be found (see Map 1).

Esch2022 and its cultural third places

Working across borders to connect cultural third places: Asymmetric willingness and the peripheral integration

The value of third places for the socio-territorial transformation of the Esch2022 area is perceivable in different policy documents defined in both countries (Dossier *Le Bâtiment IV* d'Esch-Schifflange, 2020; Rapport d'enquête publique Pôle Culturel de Micheville, 2018). All interviewed stakeholders are also convinced of their strategic function. However, differences appear on the way to implement a spatial strategy based on third places and especially on the importance of cross-border partnerships to secure this implementation. There are substantial differences between the French and the Luxembourgish interviewees. We noticed that some representatives of Luxembourgish municipalities were more reserved while evoking new opportunities to cooperate with French municipalities than their French counterparts. Usually, the Luxembourgish interviewees express some doubts, evoke complicated and fruitless experiences in the past as well as functional and legal differences that impede collaboration. In order to solve those problems and to continue working together despite administrative or cultural difficulties, the Luxembourgish stakeholders wish to have a person dedicated to the resolution of problems. On the French side of Esch2022, there is an interest in developing a deep cooperation with the Luxembourgish municipalities. The experiences of the past are not an issue and the necessity of a problem solver is not mentioned.

This difference of perception concerning the development of cross-border partnerships around cultural third places can be interpreted as result of the current cross-border functional integration and centre-periphery organisation of space driven by the Luxembourgish economy. The French part of Esch2022 has a spatial dynamic, which relies mainly on the growth that takes place in Luxembourg. It is not simply a French state spatial periphery far away from the French main regional cities like Nancy and Metz, but also a periphery of a "Greater Luxembourg" dependant on political decisions taken in the Grand Duchy. The French and local stakeholders are keen on deepening ties with Luxembourg's authorities to secure the development of their area. The actors from territorial entities who we interviewed demonstrated this dependency. They express the willingness of an integration characteristic of a European

periphery while some stakeholders in Luxembourg can be more given to analyse the pro and cons of the cross-border collaboration and its benefit for the development of their cultural third places. It is a vision of the collaboration from a centre located in an unbalanced cross-border functional area polarised by the Grand Duchy. These two different approaches of the cross-border cooperation for cultural third places exist in spite of shared visions on the localized function of cultural third places.

A European ideational integration: The valorisation of a common industrial identity through cultural third places

Without a doubt, the industrial past of the Esch2022 territory still plays an essential role on the region's identity establishment and its spatial development, as it catches for instance the visitor's eyes directly when he/she comes near the district of Esch-Belval. It also turns out that five out of seven cultural third places that have already been created/planned are located in industrial brownfields. The awarding of the call for projects "cultural Third Places" launched in 2019 by the *Œuvre Nationale de Secours* in Luxembourg attracts attention. All three selected sites (*Bâtiment IV* in Esch/Alzette, *Ferroforum & Kamelleschmelz* in Schifflange, but also *Cultural Hub+/Vestiaires* in Dudelange) will emerge on brownfields. Still in Luxembourg, the existing Creative Hub 1535° of Differdange is located in a disaffected building of a still operative steel factory. Furthermore, the French Third Place *L'Arche* in Villerupt also rises on a former steel plant.

The objective of all these third cultural places is to preserve a close connection to their industrial heritage. We noticed that the local actors took into account the industrial past during the planning and building-up of third places. The cross-border co-operation around third places is not currently operative, but there are many similarities at the cross-border scale concerning the role of third places to imagine the territorial identity of the area. Third places are elements that help to remobilize a shared European and industrial past, a past helping to conceive a localized European integration. As suggested by Paul¹ in France, third places must help to "find synergies between the French and Luxembourgish actors that would foster the positioning of the only

¹ The name has been changed.

cultural third place on a French territory in this area and therefore be beneficial to the entire regional cultural scene whose mission is to give a new identity to the former industrial area”. Meanwhile, Josiane² in Luxembourg mentions the fact that “cultural third places should be non-elitist sites where everyone, for example the people who worked in the local steel industry, can share something with someone from inside the place to regain consciousness of the industrial past and discover a new cultural dimension”. The objective of the third places-driven urban regeneration is to formulate an inclusive and rooted identity in a region strongly impacted by the industrial crisis of the late 20th century.

Material assets to imagine a cross-border polycentric development in two peripheries

As mentioned before, the Esch2022 area is in a broader transborder functional region polarised by the urban agglomeration of Luxembourg City. The area of Esch2022 used to be the cross-border economic motor of European integration between the late 19th century and the 1970s when economic growth in this part of Europe was based on the heavy industry (Kieffer, 1997). It cannot currently keep up with the capital city of the Grand Duchy in terms of the service economy in spite of the recent decentralisation and development of the University of Luxembourg in Esch. However, the third places of Esch2022 can become nodes of a culture-based polycentric region including other art places to be found in this greater region; they include major cities such as Luxembourg-City, but also Trier in Germany and Metz in France.

The current stage of the cross-border collaboration around cultural third places of Esch2022 does not allow to plan a shared strategy to secure the most effective possible regional attractiveness across borders in terms of audiences and artists. However, all these third places have common material assets. Firstly, there are highly accessible due to motorways and train stations being located close to the sites. Third places have benefitted from existing train connections that were developed during the industrial development of the past century with the current economic dynamics in Luxembourg and the growing flows of commuters justifying an increase of train services. Furthermore, a series of highways and other good road connections have also been built-up at the cross-border scale to facilitate the economic-related flows

² The name has been changed.

polarised by the Grand Duchy. Secondly, third places are defined in a territory where there is already an existing offer in terms of cultural activities (e.g. theatres, museums, art galleries...). The material co-presence of multiple sources of cultural attractions makes it possible for a series of emblematic third places to secure both the visibility of Esch2022 in terms of cultural offer and also a more cohesive image in the broader cross-border region. The third places of Esch2022 are often conceived as poles of social inclusion through cultural activities. Consequently, their purposes would not be simply to attract the elite of the broad cross-border region, but to plan a cultural programme that would be attractive for different types of social classes including the less privileged ones present within the territory of Esch2022.

Conclusion

Esch2022, following Luxembourg-Greater Region2007, is one of very few ECoC whose territory crosses state borders and which combines activities involving people and places located in different countries. It is consequently one of the most emblematic examples to study with a view to appreciate the role of ECoC in terms of European integration. This integration is never easy in terms of governance. Esch2022 is an opportunity to imagine a more efficient cross-border collaboration facilitating a spatial European integration through cultural activities at multiple scales. The cultural third places found in Esch2022 and launched/developed in preparation of the 2022 year of culture are key sites around which this co-operation can be contemplated for a more integrated Europe.

The situation exposed in this article shows that the state border is still a structuring factor of the cultural governance with a clear asymmetric bordering process; the French side of Esch2022 has been expressing a stronger willingness to co-operate across borders while some stakeholders of the Luxembourg side have been mentioning some doubts about the opportunity to do so. Nevertheless, the cultural third places of Esch2022 can become elements of a more integrated Europe at the cross-border scale for two reasons. First and foremost, there is a shared vision of their function among local stakeholders: to remobilize a common territorial identity embedded in the industrial past. Secondly, these third places benefit from a material setting (transport infrastructures and existing cultural milieu) which facilitate their attractiveness in a broader European region.

The effective and culture-based European spatial integration in Esch2022 will depend on two interconnected parameters: 1) a capacity to imagine a cross-border multi-level governance on culture, by overcoming the economy-inspired core-periphery and win-win strategy of the transfrontier collaborations, 2) a shared willingness across borders not to forget the *losers* of the European Union while defining the function of third places that is the less affluent segment of the local Luxembourg and French society experiencing increasing inequalities and who may consider that the current European construction and its culture is not made for them. The effectiveness will depend on the capacity of Esch2022 to make a local contribution to a renewed and more inclusive European Integration whose long-term foundations are currently being jeopardised by successful populist parties surfing on doubts and fears expressed by a growing share of Europeans.

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