



A place at the table: engaging young people in the culture sector

Contributors

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Context and Rationale

This paper explores the context in which young people operate in the culture sector, identifies challenges and barriers and introduces ways to empower and enhance their roles through the Culture Next network and European Capital of Culture initiative.

There's a widespread agreement that young people are essential for culture – both as (future) audiences as well as creators, be it artists or culture professionals. Moreover, the youth engagement in culture is frequently identified as a key means of achieving *other* priority objectives of European policies, such as promoting active citizenship. While the urgency for engaging youth in culture is recognised, their potential is often held back by barriers and stereotypes – or simple unawareness.

Given the context of the European Capital of Culture title, one of whose criteria is to engage the younger generation, short-term collaborations between ECoC cities often emerge to link youth culture initiatives in their regions. The stable collaboration between Culture Next cities brings the opportunity to leverage such cooperation in the long-term perspective.

To address this opportunity, the Thematic working group on Youth has been formed to explore the current barriers of youth engagement in culture and find ways to create more opportunities for just and meaningful participation within the network.

This paper argues that while supporting participation and leadership roles of youth in culture, it is necessary to reflect the needs of young people to create opportunities for meaningful cooperation. This includes empowerment through meaningful participation, where youth are not just token representatives but are actively involved in decision-making processes. Additionally, support for mental health is crucial, as young individuals face unique pressures that demand a balanced work-life dynamic and a sense of purpose in their roles. Lastly, intergenerational collaboration should be prioritized, ensuring that the insights of older generations complement the innovative ideas of youth, fostering sustainable growth in cultural projects.

Following this, recommendations for actions for Culture Next network and its members were developed. Those can be adopted by policymakers, cities and cultural organizations looking for ways to give young people an equal seat at the table.

Culture Next Action

Setting up the Thematic Working Group (TWG)

The coordination of the Thematic Working Group was assigned to Budweis, European Capital of Culture 2028. To provide context for the topic of the paper, the TWG was coordinated by young professionals under 30 from the Outreach team of the Budweis 2028 organisation, whose experience is based on more than 10 years of leadership roles in youth cultural organisations.

A young European expert Stephanie Bonnici was selected for cooperation through the Thematic Working Group. She and her colleagues from ARC Research & Consultancy brought experience in empowering young people in cultural and political spaces and fostering meaningful collaborations. Stephanie Bonnici's focus lies at the intersection of dialogue, policy, advocacy, arts, and community engagement, and is driven by meaningful collaboration and exchange at the national and European levels. She recently worked and contributed to impactful projects like Culture Action Europe's *Pop the Vote!*

Workshop

The online workshop took place on 23 October 2024 with the aim to exchange good practices on how to create a supportive space for young people as culture leaders and active participants. The workshop itself was designed to enhance the intergenerational dialogue and gathered more than 20 participants from the Culture Next cities and their nominated youth representatives.

Key activities included:

- **Panel conversations** featuring experiences from cultural leaders like Fjorida Cenaj (leader of creative youth groups in Elefsina – CULTTERRA, Eleusis 2023) and Davinia Galea (policy and governance – ARC Research & Consultancy). Discussions explored balancing governance needs with youth leadership and fostering youth autonomy.

- **Conversation with Ana Benavides Otero from EFFE.** The EFFE uses Seal for Festival Cities & Regions as a tool to invite cities and regions to across Europe to cooperate with their local festivals – and to associate and integrate their development and image with a strong cultural - and European - commitment. In parallel, the Culture next initiative could initiate cooperation between local governments, culture organisations and youth through similar tools.
- **Breakout rooms** to engage all participants who mapped local contexts, identified challenges young people experience and how these impact their ability to lead or participate in culture. It was concluded by discussion on what steps can be taken to empower young leaders.

The workshop identified challenges for young people in culture, including disillusionment from the future, tokenization, limited growth, low decision-making opportunities, and mental health struggles in precarious work environments.

The need for stronger trust and collaboration between generations was addressed through the whole session. This argument supports the prioritisation of creating opportunities for young people within existing institutions and networks, not only given incentives for new youth initiatives to emerge.

Young Creators Meet-up

The hybrid event took place on 14 November 2024 in Budweis following up on the findings from the workshop. It presented good practice from youth initiatives in 3 cities with the title European Capital of Culture. The event gathered more than 40 cultural leaders, policymakers, and youth representatives from across Europe.

Key activities included:

- **Panel conversation: Young, Bold, Losing Hope?**
 - Stephanie Bonnici engaged in a thought-provoking conversation with Bianka Machová, exploring the intersection of youth empowerment, trust, and systemic challenges. Topics ranged from combating the tokenization of youth to building equitable intergenerational collaborations and safe spaces for growth.
- **Presentations + panel discussion: Successful stories of youth engagement**

- Presentations of youth-led initiatives that are a great example of young people's involvement in culture and active citizenship.
- Kaunas 2022 – Emerging Kaunas: The Kaunas Challenge is a program empowering young people to bring their cultural ideas to life with the guidance of mentors. The programme ran from 2017 to 2022 as part of Kaunas ECoC 2022 and is now a successful legacy that continues under leadership of former participants. The programme includes hands-on lectures, team challenges, and opportunities to explore the city and collaborate with cultural institutions. The program also fostered a vibrant alumni community where participants continued to experiment, develop cultural initiatives and further share their experience.
- Tartu 2024 – Tartu Extended: Tartu 2024 Extended is the youth program of the Tartu ECoC 2024, aimed at introducing young people to production of cultural events. Designed for 14-19-year-olds in Tartu and Southern Estonia, the program offers six sessions teaching project development, teamwork, and event planning. Participants also get hands-on experience by contributing to specific events. Tartu extended is a showcase of how to create cultural programs with and for youth and how to integrate cultural activities into community development.
- Budweis 2028 – Budějovický Majáles: Budějovický Majáles is a unique student-led festival that has become a cornerstone of the cultural scene in České Budějovice since its establishment 21 years ago. The week long programme offers a platform for emerging artists while creating a space for the local community to come together, targeting diverse audiences. What sets Budějovický Majáles apart is its focus on youth empowerment and leadership. Experienced students are sharing their know-how with younger team members in regular cycles. The festival fosters skills in teamwork, project management, and creative problem-solving. It's a space where young people shape the cultural identity of their city.
- **Workshops** (in person only)
 - Workshop with the Czech National Agency for International Education and Research: Youth projects in culture – possibilities of European cooperation
 - Workshop: Mapping the engagement and needs of participants – youth culture leaders, producers and artist.

Podcast

- **Young, Bold and Losing hope: Conversation between Stephanie Bonnici and Biana Machová**

Young, Bold and Losing hope explores the challenges and opportunities for young people in both – European and local contexts. It reflects on themes like intergenerational collaboration, democracy, and youth leadership and how culture can become a tool for empowerment. Through personal reflections it also dives into issues of tokenization, mental health pressures, and the importance of safe spaces for youth to lead and express themselves.

- **Youth Voices: Insights from the Thematic Working Group #YOUTH**

The TWG #YOUTH outputs were compiled into an engaging podcast with the assistance of AI to produce a format which is easy to understand.

Key Takeaways

- **From youth tokenization to empowerment:** Many young people are currently hired to culture organisations to meet the diversity policies. They are often underpaid and given limited growth opportunities, with roles that fail to provide meaningful participation. There's little to no room to fail and learn. Youth involvement must extend beyond visibility or token roles.
- **From volunteers to professionals:** There should be paths for advancement for and create safe spaces that allow youth to experiment, fail, and grow. It helps to create structural support for decision-making spaces, leadership opportunities, mentorship, and autonomy in youth-led initiatives.
- **Caring for mental health:** The precarious nature of cultural work and systemic pressures highlight the need for greater mental health support for young people. The way how the upcoming generation is expected to be treated in work or volunteer positions or while participating is changing: people expect to see meaning behind the tasks, set boundaries for work-life balance.
- **Trust and intergenerational collaboration:** Involve people in decision-making processes. It is crucial to balance governance needs with youth leadership, fostering youth autonomy, ensuring that their voices are not only heard but also respected and acted upon. Combining the experience of older generations with the urgency of youth are vital for sustainable growth and critical continuity. Intergenerational collaboration is

crucial for long-term impact and sustainable projects' growth, ensuring projects benefit from diverse perspectives and balanced participation.

- **Accept the brain drain dynamics:** Foster relationship to the city and region and make sure it does not end when the young person moves away, but it evolves. While not everyone may choose to return immediately, they can still contribute to their community and places of origin. The European collaborations and shared opportunities within the network can be used to the advantage of the young people's desire to explore and learn something new.
- **Relevance and belonging:** Creating a sense of belonging—both to cities and Europe—through cultural initiatives can counter polarization and inspire collective action. To make people feel they matter and can make a change so they don't feel sidelined is especially important in times when voting tendencies are shifting to support parties with radical views. Cultural initiatives should reflect the interests and needs of youth, respecting their communities and providing inclusive spaces for expression.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The actions within Culture Next TWG #YOUTH, were focused on finding ways to increase youth involvement in the cultural sector. The opportunities within the title European Capital of Culture and within Culture next network were explored with the goal to develop specific action which could be implemented by the network and its members.

The key takeaways included the need for cultural initiatives to adapt to the interests and needs of young people, providing inclusive spaces where they can express themselves. Youth involvement should go beyond token roles and offer real leadership opportunities, with structural support for decision-making, mentorship, and autonomy in youth-led projects. Intergenerational collaboration is vital for ensuring long-term success, bringing diverse perspectives and balanced participation to cultural projects. Young people also need safe spaces to experiment, fail, and grow, which nurtures their creativity and leadership skills. Finally, creating a sense of belonging through cultural initiatives—both locally and across Europe—can help counter polarization and inspire collective action.

Young people's role and participation in culture is critical, not just for their own growth but also for creative innovation which can be transferred to other fields, such as civic or political. As leaders, they bring bold, fresh and provoking ideas that tackle big issues like climate change,

social justice, and technology. To truly support their potential and impact, we need to make real changes in our approach that give them the power to lead and make decisions, not just follow along.

Recommendations for European policy creators, decision makers:

- Foster intergenerational dialogue:
 - Establish platforms where young and older generations can collaborate on equal footing, leveraging the energy and spirit of youth and the experience of older generations.
 - Promote policies that mandate youth representation in cultural decision-making bodies.
- Support structural investments in youth engagement:
 - Prioritize funding for programs that empower young people as leaders and decision-makers, not just participants.
 - Integrate mental health and well-being initiatives into cultural programs to address systemic pressures.
 - Develop incentives for cooperation between incentives such as European capital of youth and European capital of culture

Recommendations for European cities (including Culture Next members) and National Governments

- Support local youth-led cultural ecosystems:
 - Encourage youth councils or advisory boards for cultural planning.
- Use ECoC frameworks to ensure legacy projects:
 - Ensure ECoC projects prioritize long-term impacts by embedding youth-led initiatives within city development plans and culture policies.
 - Promote cross-city knowledge-sharing on best practices for youth engagement in culture.

Recommendations for Culture Next

- Open a discussion on how the network works, what opportunities it could give to youth culture professionals.
 - Consider providing place at the table for youth during selected events, such as conferences – i.e. by nominating youth leaders from member cities

- Consider job shadowing for young leaders or inviting youth representative to participate in the Culture Next board
 - Create a sustainable platform within Culture Next, where youth initiatives from member cities can meet and build long-lasting cooperations
 - Consider Open calls and opportunities for development of youth or intergenerational international cooperation projects
 - Share good practice and build skills – consider developing:
 - Capacity building for member cities on youth engagement in culture
 - Capacity building for youth culture leaders from member cities on international cooperation
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Participants and contributors to the Thematic working group #Youth

Budweis | Budweis 2028, Budějovický Majáles

Bielsko-Biała | Youth City Council of Bielsko-Biała, Bielsko-Biała 2029

Kortrijk | DURF2030

Debrecen | DEMKI - Debrecen Cultural Centre and Youth House Nonprofit Ltd.

Udine | Udine University, Collaborator of Chiara Isadora Artico from GECT

Oulu | Oulu Culture Foundation, Oulu 2026

Elefsina | 2023 Eleusis European Capital of Culture

Burgos | Burgos 2031

Chemnitz | Kulturhauptstadt 2025 Chemnitz gGmbH

Leeuwarden | Arcadia

Larnaka | Larnaka 2030

Lublin | Homo Faber Association/ Lublin 2029

Sandra Karnilavičiūtė | Emerging Kaunas, Kaunas 2022

Angela Ader | Tartu Extended, Tartu 2024

Hermína Ottová | Budějovický Majáles, Tartu 2024

Martina Příplatová | Budějovický Majáles

and others 10 unregistered participants

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About Culture Next

The European Capital of Culture (ECoC) is one of the most recognized action programmes of the European Union. The dynamics and dimension of the process makes it attractive to cities that seek cultural, social, economic and infrastructural transformation. The hundreds of cities participating in this process bring together a vast set of learnings, good practice and knowledge that it's important to share and by doing so, to be an agent of positive action for Europe.

Culture Next's mission is to contribute to having more European Capital of Culture (ECoC) programmes implemented in European cities and regions and to define a long-term European vision on local development through culture and creativity.

Building on the experiences, processes and collaborations established during the ECoC bid, we support all cities, being them awarded or not, to implement culture-led local development programmes and policies. We are committed to deliver a sustainable impact and meaningful legacy of the ECoC programme.

Whether being ECoC labelled or not, all cities need support and inspiration in order to carry on with the implementation of their programmes. The partnerships, talents and resources mobilised through ECoC bidding make a strong base for culture-led sustainable development in these cities. We can all contribute to the success and legacy of the ECoC project.

Cities are where democracy, inclusiveness and innovation are produced, and culture is a facilitator of this entire ecosystem. More cities with cultural programmes mean more power to address European challenges and opportunities.

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