



Cultural policies in a small university metropolis: national frameworks and local dynamics in the city of Brest

Bénédicte Havard Duclos and Pierre-Edouard Weill

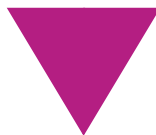
Assistant Professor in Sociology, LABERS, Université de Bretagne Occidentale and Assistant Professor in Sociology, Lab-LEX, Université de Bretagne Occidentale.
Co-Directors of the Master's degree in Management of Cultural Projects and Institutions, Université de Bretagne Occidentale.
France.

Benedicte.havard-duclos@univ-brest.fr and pierreedouard.weill@gmail.com

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Abstract: Brest metropolis is a university town with some 30,000 students out of a population of 215,000 inhabitants. However, it is not truly a typical student city and its status of cultural metropolis still needs to be strengthened. Cultural policies have been put in place alongside the gradual withdrawal of the city's military activities and this has boosted the city's metamorphosis. Since the early 2000s, Brest has evolved from a working-class, naval city, built around its arsenal, to a more academic and cultural city. The implemented cultural policies, that are based on dynamic local initiatives, are strongly shaped by national frameworks. Brest's cultural institutions (non-profits and public organizations) are increasingly gaining national and European recognition.

Keywords: cultural policies; university; metropolis; national frameworks; local dynamics.



Introduction

In 2020, Brest was shortlisted for the first French Capital of Culture award, a French Ministry of Culture label designated every two years to a medium-sized city with an outstanding offer in terms of fostering creation, valorizing heritage, developing artistic and cultural transmission, encouraging the mobilization of inhabitants, and facilitating the involvement of local artists and cultural actors¹. Brest's bid lost out to Villeurbanne in Lyon in the end, but its application serves to highlight not only the city's cultural dynamism but also its seemingly ambiguous population size (140,000 inhabitants, 215,000 in the whole metropolis). In a typical example of how local and national cultural policies interact, the latter means that Brest occupies what can only be described as an undetermined policy space in which it is prevented from participating in the competition to become a candidate city for the European Capital of Culture label, or accessing funding from the French government that has been earmarked for medium-sized cities. Since the beginning of the 2000s, Brest's cultural institutions (both non-profits and public organizations) have been increasingly seeking national, financial and

symbolic recognition. This trend has accelerated over the last decade, as state recognition is part of the institutionalization and professionalization of the local cultural worlds in Brest, as in many other cities (Dubois, 2012).

Brest is located at the western-most tip of France, on the Atlantic coast, and, along with its seven surrounding municipalities, is the second largest city in the Brittany region and the smallest metropolis in France. It obtained metropolitan status because of, *inter alia*, its peninsular location which for a large city in the region is unparalleled (Rennes and Nantes are 250 and 300 km away, respectively), the presence of a multidisciplinary university, major research centres, and an international airport. In fact, Brest extends over a larger area with a population of one million inhabitants and its metropolitan status means that it has wide-ranging powers and responsibilities, particularly as regards cultural matters. Structured around its military port, which was developed by Louis XIV in the 17th century, Brest is a working-class city that also has a high population of public-sector workers. The navy still has a significant influence over the city's architectural and social structure to this day, for example, access to the sea is mainly reserved for military activities and

thus inaccessible to Brest residents and the general public. However, since the late 1990s, these military zones have been undergoing regeneration to open them up to the public and in some cases, to create new cultural venues such as the former shipbuilding workshops the Ateliers des Capucins, which have become the largest covered public space in Europe. Historically, Brest is an industrial city and is still a working-class city today; gentrification is slow and although social inequalities are increasing, most neighbourhoods are both socially and architecturally mixed. Brest was almost entirely destroyed by the bombings in the Second World War and rebuilt in the aftermath, which has led to perceptions of it being a city with no heritage or cultural significance. The area is best known for two strong cultural markers that are attractive for tourists: linguistic, musical and festive practices, and maritime culture. These are present both at the local and regional level, but are more likely to be found in Brest's surrounding areas than in Brest itself.

Like the city, the University of Western Brittany (UBO) is medium-sized. However, its student population is steadily growing: student intake surpassed 24,000 in the 2021-22 academic year. UBO first appeared on the Shanghai ranking in 2019 in recognition of its world-leading oceanography research, an achievement that not only heightened the university's attractiveness, but also, along with its international outlook, extended its outreach beyond the regional level. However, the university also has a particularly strong local base and draws on support from public authorities and the local socio-economic environment. In return, the university has a significant impact on the city, especially in terms of demographics, as the metropolis has over 30,000 students registered in higher education programs. However, students are not always permanent residents in Brest and as such, are not major participants in the city's cultural life. In fact, as a large part of the student population live in surrounding towns, their student life is not necessarily based in Brest itself. This has created a paradoxical situation in which students make up a large percentage of the city's overall population but the city's student identity is not very strong, with hardly any student presence in the city centre. As such, Brest has become a student city that does not conform to the usual representations, for example, it has low pedestrian and cycling rates and very few student spaces and venues identified as such.

The objective of the present article, therefore, is threefold: it will present how the city of Brest's cultural life is shaped by the implementation of (1) national policies, (2) local initiatives, and will analyse (3) the specific role of the University in the local cultural life and policies to gain a better understanding of the paradoxical place that students occupy in the city.

Cultural Policy: how the national shapes the local

Centralization in France has meant that the state is highly involved in cultural policies. However, the path to this type of governance was not straightforward as there were a great deal of responsibility conflicts between the local and national actors at the end of the 19th century and between the two World Wars. This led to the creation of a Ministry of Culture with significant powers in 1959 (Dubois, 1999) and since its foundation, it has played an important role in cultural matters, despite political changes and relatively low financial resources (less than 1% of the government's overall budget). Some municipalities have shown their capacity for initiating and implementing local cultural policies that fit into national frameworks, partly formalized by the laws on decentralisation, to obtain public funding and symbolic recognition. Brest's cultural life, like that of many other metropolises, received public funding under François Mitterrand's presidency in the early 1980s, especially when Jack Lang was the Culture Minister. Local authority representatives and national senior civil servants often share the same objectives regarding democratization (support for artistic creation and for artists in the form of grants and benefits) and creation development (believing in the need to disseminate "high culture" and facilitating the widest possible access to culture by removing material and symbolic obstacles), and agree on the logics of institutionalization and formalization of their activities (Dubois, 2012).

The French national cultural policy largely underpins the local one and can take different forms. In Paris and large cities in general, the convention is for the government to directly oversee the funding and management of cultural institutions (operas, theatres, orchestras, museums, etc.), without any specific delegation to local authorities. The opposite is true for Brest, which is a city that has highly developed its labelling mechanisms, related funding, and partnerships

with other regional, departmental or municipal public entities. In this situation, national policies directly support local cultural policies, which is highly effective in terms of visibility, recognition and access to public funding. However, as these projects are the result of several decades of work carried out by public and private actors to legitimize their activities, there is often a time lag between the actual creation of a cultural venue and its national accreditation. Brest has several labelled venues, notably Le Quartz, which opened in 1988 and was awarded *scène nationale* (national performing arts centre) status in 2001. This is the main local public cultural institution for the contemporary performing arts. It has two 1,500- and 500-seater capacity halls, rehearsal rooms, and recording studios. Le Quartz is nationally renowned for its theatre, choreography and music programme offering a wide range of genres and aesthetics, and boasts exceptional annual attendance figures.

In the musical sector, since the late 1980s, the government has been working alongside local authorities to develop contemporary creation. This co-creation process launched the “Café musiques” programme whose objective was to officially recognize amplified music, which in turn led to the creation of the National Centre for Musical Creation (CNCM) in Brest in 1989, which was the first centre for contemporary music in Brittany. In 2007, the concert hall La Carène took over the CNCM certification. This important structure, located in the commercial port, has a large performance hall with 1,500-seat capacity, a smaller 350-seater room for more intimate performances, a 500-seat concert venue on the deck, and seven rehearsal studios. Since the hall’s creation, the government has been an effective partner and is also involved to a certain extent in its daily management. La Carène, however, is not part of the government’s contemporary music centre (SMAC) national network. There are two SMAC establishments in the *département*: a modest establishment located 50km away from Brest in a town of less than 10,000 inhabitants and the Penn Ar Jazz association (based in Brest since 1997) working in the dissemination and promotion of jazz and improvised electronic music. By keeping the SMAC label in the smaller town, the Ministry of Culture was demonstrating their commitment to maintaining a national balance and continuing to make funding accessible to small towns by ensuring that it is not just concentrated in the larger cities. In addition, a regional conservatoire, which hosts

2,000 students per year, is also part of a national programme for the dissemination of arts and culture.

This labelling policy extends to fields other than the performing arts. In Brest, such examples include museums (Musée National de la Marine) and contemporary art (Centre d’Art Contemporain La Passerelle). Although the latter opened in 1988, it would be thirty years before it received the Ministry of Culture’s Contemporary Art Centre of National Interest (Centre d’art contemporain d’intérêt national) label. This time lag between the creation of an establishment and its national accreditation can also be seen with the street arts centre Le Fourneau, which opened at the end of the 1990s and only became accredited as a national centre for street arts and public space (CNAREP) in 2005. It is important to note that Le Fourneau, like La Passerelle, is a non-profit organisation. It is therefore civil society representatives rather than public authorities who are mostly behind cultural facilities and projects in the city of Brest. Moreover, the local authority (ville de Brest) is fully involved in national events and the city has other labels that contribute to promoting local culture. In addition to the Fête de la Musique (free national music festival that takes place on 21 June every year, created in 1982), and the European Heritage Days (third weekend in September, created in 1984), municipal services also work towards labels such as “City of Art and History” and, as previously mentioned, “French Capital of Culture”. In 2017, Brest was awarded the City of Art and History label which recognizes the city’s commitment to the protection and promotion of heritage, encourages awareness-raising campaigns among residents, particularly young people, and the development of cultural tourism. The application highlighted three dimensions of Brest’s identity: the city’s military and maritime character, its ability to rebuild itself after it was nearly completely destroyed in the Second World War, and the strength of its non-profit sector. Had Brest’s application for French capital of culture been successful, the City of Brest would have received a one-million euro government subsidy, which would have given a boost to its cultural projects for 2022.

Since the early 2000s, local cultural actors have thus increasingly strived for national, financial and symbolic recognition, a process that has accelerated over the last decade and been combined with various local drives.

Where local policy extends national frameworks

Inclusion in a national dynamic does not necessarily confine the initiatives of local cultural actors to the frameworks and objectives defined by their national counterparts. Indeed, there has been a clear boom in cultural services within French metropolises in recent years, which has been favoured by a relative depolitization of cultural affairs since the end of the 1980s, coupled with an increase in related budgets (Poulard, 2020). Since the late 1970s, Brest has mostly been governed by centre-left mayors, and more rarely by centre-right ones. The current mayor (François Cuillandre, re-elected for a fourth term in 2021) is a social-democrat. This means that the Office places great emphasis on cultural policies, a stance reflected in the City of Brest's allocation of human and financial resources: since 2008, over 10% of its operating budget has been designated for cultural policy, which in 2021 was almost €20 million. When compared to other more populous cities, this amount is particularly high and makes it possible for local policies to break free from the limitations of national frameworks and funding. This localized investment in cultural facilities and services has an economic development logic: from the local authority perspective, it is vitally important to support local development through culture as the town is losing jobs due to the gradual withdrawal of the industrial activities of the French Navy.

While the economic impact of this strategy is still to be determined, the city's performing arts facilities have greatly increased since the early 1990s and in the municipality of Brest alone there are now a dozen such institutions of

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various sizes. The newest venue is the 150-seat Théâtre des Capucins. This new facility opened in September 2021 and is located next to a new state of the art library on the Ateliers des Capucins site (the renovation of these former shipbuilding workshops received European funding for local cultural projects (Sassatelli, 2009)). The Maison du Théâtre opened in 2011 on the site of an abandoned cinema that had

been completely renovated. Its performances are mainly aimed at young children and teenagers, with an amateur theatre focus. It is primarily funded by the city council, and secondarily by the departmental and regional council. This is also the case for the Mac Orlan, a 450-seat municipal theatre that focuses on choreographic creation. Other towns in the Brest metropolis have also seen a sharp increase in their cultural facilities, notably with the creation in 2005 of the Avel Vor multi-purpose hall in Plougastel. This can accommodate up to 2,500 spectators and offers an eclectic programme. The efforts made by the peripheral communes, largely supported by the metropolis, are ongoing; another project in the pipeline is for a similar-sized hall to Avel Vor in Plouzané, whose

programming will involve a mix of nationally renowned artists in residence and local community productions. Public expenditure is largely dedicated to the actual construction of these facilities and the running costs are also covered by the local authorities. Eight million euros are allocated for employee wages at the media libraries, conservatoire, various city museums, and central cultural services. Moreover, state subsidies are

not granted by means of a “legitimacy” scale that favours high art over popular art, nor do they hierarchize forms of artistic expression. This can be seen by the 5,000 capacity national and international sports and events venue Brest Arena (opened in 2014), which is a semi-public entity in which the city of Brest has a majority stake. This type of financing, which can be found in most French metropolitan areas, aims to affirm and legitimize such a status beyond local and regional borders.

This increase in local public spending is fuelled by a widely shared belief among local officials in a systematic causality between cultural development, urban revitalization and local economic growth. To say that Brest is experiencing a “Bilbao effect” would be going too far, especially in the absence of major architectural achievements. Nevertheless, the significant financial and human investments respond to the local authorities’ specific concerns: they are seeking to reinforce the territory’s attractiveness at the regional or national scale, an objective that is all the more imperative bearing in mind Brest’s fragile status as a metropolis considering its size. However, it is rather difficult to recognize the effects of such political voluntarism in terms of territorial economic attractiveness. The city of Brest is part of a region that has an extremely high tourism rate, however, it is not identified as a tourism-worthy place, which is evidenced by the poorly developed hotel or seasonal rental offer. The first time that culture was used as the conduit to heighten the city’s mainly tourism-related attractiveness, was for the international maritime festival which takes place every four years in Brest during the summer. Moreover, rather than the emergence of a real “creative class” (Florida, 2002), it is more fitting to refer to a small, highly cohesive cultural bourgeoisie (Guérault, 2017). These dynamic, well-connected people, are able to mobilize, make things happen and satisfy expectations at any time, not just during electoral periods or for political gain.

Local cultural policies are largely based on a multitude of private initiatives that come from a highly structured civil society. In Brest, over 1,350 associations exist, employing their activities through the organization of numerous nationally renowned festivals in different creative fields, which very often receive support from the public authorities. Such fields include electronic music (Astropolis), contemporary dance (Dansfabrik)

radio (Longueur d’ondes), and the Brest European Short Film Festival. Non-profit organizations are also involved in over 20 public community centres providing socio-cultural activities; their offer fluctuates between social and cultural activities but they are still a space for amateur practice and support cultural dissemination. Although local funding appears to be increasingly focused on artistic creation, socio-cultural activities also receive significant support from the City as it strives to stay true to its position of making cultural rights accessible to all, which it does so by creating an events programme that is open, accessible and attractive to all. However, the local participatory public budgeting mechanisms that have been put in place in the cultural field are not necessarily effective (Marx, 2019): they mainly serve to strengthen actors and networks that are already well established at the local level and who have already achieved national recognition. This is also the case for UBO initiatives which also mainly mobilize these locally-recognized actors. The university could certainly improve how it meets such demands from the student population, but it must be noted that it is extremely difficult to set up initiatives and actions when the base population fluctuates constantly, e.g., students who only complete their first year of study, those who continue their studies but who do not go the full course, and students who ultimately move away from academic study to more vocational learning.

When the university plays a greater role in local cultural life

The University of Western Brittany (UBO) celebrates its 50th anniversary in 2021. UBO was initially an undergraduate centre annexed to the University of Rennes and gained its autonomy in 1971, following the protests by student and worker movements that swept through the country in 1968 and catalysed local regionalist demands around the issue of autonomous development (Bougeard, 2017). The university’s development thus predates its growing contribution to the cultural life of Brest from the end of the 1990s, notably through the creation of artistic and cultural training and the development of central services dedicated to culture.

Despite its economic boom after the second world war, Brittany was still a relatively poor agricultural region in the 1970s with exceptionally high secondary school enrolment

and pass rates. In parallel to this, there was a steady increase in student enrolments both at UBO and in Brest as a whole (in 2021 this was 24,000 and 30,000, respectively). There are nearly 1,000 permanent academic staff who work at the university, with some 300 temporary staff. The UBO is a multidisciplinary and multi-site university that is made up of scores of fragmented entities with their own particular objectives, research, statuses, and expected outcomes. Alongside the very large training departments (biology, medicine, psychology, law, sports sciences) with up to 800 undergraduate students, there are also highly specialized courses (mostly at Master's degree level) with much smaller classes of around ten students. Historically, marine sciences have structured research in Brest and have secured significant local investment by major national research institutions (e.g., CNRS – the French National Centre for Scientific Research, and IFREMER – the French National Institution for Ocean Sciences). Beyond the international visibility that this speciality affords, which in 2019 materialized into entry into the Shanghai ranking, UBO is above all characterized by its multidisciplinary and its essentially local recruitment. However, fulfilling a triple mission of training, research and professionalization comes with its own challenges that must also be overcome: undergraduate failure rates in the first cycle, students who do not finish their course of studies, balancing the vocational and academic offer, bridging the gap between the non-specialist training offer during early years of study and the niche research and missions of excellence further down the line, and adequately meeting the area's economic and social needs.

This forms the background for the creation of the Master's degree in Management of Cultural Projects and Institutions in 1999 that was set up by academics from the field of arts who were specialized in management and administration. This Master's degree is open to around twenty students in both continuing and initial training every two years. The founders of this degree identified the pressing need to train administrators for local cultural facilities and projects in the Brest area, and therefore set out to involve local industry leaders in the degree course. Many students who followed this course are now working in the city's cultural institutions and “give back” by maintaining links to the university. Therefore, when the association “Pays de Brest pour la culture” (Brest region for culture) was

created in 2014 following the planned reforms of the status of workers in the entertainment industry with no steady employment (“intermittents du spectacle”), the university served as an intermediary in terms of local support: people who defended culture and a source of information on dedicated public resources. A cycle of reflection on “cultural rights” initiated by this collective gave rise to seminars led by students and researcher-lecturers of the Master's course between 2016 and 2020. Since 1999, many new Master's degrees in Management of Cultural Projects and Institutions have appeared across France, but this training course is still a source of local pride because it was a forerunner in its field. 2017 saw the opening of an Arts department that is led by academics who are a driving force in Brest's artistic landscape and have been strongly involved in this above-mentioned Master's degree. This now brings together around one hundred undergraduate students, who engage in artistic practices in the city's cultural institutions. This is still a highly sought-after training course, but it suffers from insufficient funding and staffing: the three professors who run this course manage to keep its 20-year old founding philosophy of the local dynamic alive despite insufficient state funding, which cannot be topped up by local investment because the deficit is far too high.

Beyond these two training courses, general interest in a UBO cultural policy has recently sprung up. For a long time, academics have helped build local cultural policies, as have elected officials, and now efforts are being made to better connect the city and the university. The recent devolution that gave universities more control over managing their own budget, assets and recruitment policy, led to the UBO creating the role of Vice President for culture and sustainable development. The first post holder was N. Leclerc from 2016 to 2020, who helped structure the university's cultural offer and strengthen links with the city's cultural partners. As co-editor-in-chief of a cultural news magazine for the Brittany region from 2014 to 2017, she has also published numerous articles and interviews with artists, authors and other cultural professionals. She was particularly involved in reflection on the implementation of cultural rights, the new reference framework for national cultural policies set out in the Freiburg Declaration. She now manages the programming of artistic and cultural events organized on the different UBO campuses,



for which the Les Abords exhibition space was created on the city-centre campus. Her successor is C. Paillard who is developing a strong Arts and Sciences focus, which has led to the creation of the RESSAC (RechercheS en ScienceS Arts et Création) festival. The second edition of this festival will take place in March 2022 and its success lies in its strong link with the policies of the metropolis. Similarly, the cultural service is being structured and although it is still in its early stages in terms of resources and staff on fixed-term contracts, its activities have developed and it has high ambitions. In addition to preferential rates in the city's cultural facilities negotiated with local partners (arthouse cinemas, theatres, festivals, etc.), the service manages a series of cultural workshops, runs artistic competitions and has launched a dynamic program of on-campus cultural events. Finally, these cultural ambitions are reinforced with support from the university for projects with an artistic dimension, such as funding provided by the Faculty of Arts and Humanities for staff or student projects, or a more cohesive and festive dimension such as the

on-campus concerts organized by the Dean of the Faculty of Law to mark the start of the 2021 academic year. Both the City and the university support the annual student welcoming festival Les Pétarades, which was launched in 2010 and is held each September.

The city of Brest is today highly dynamic in cultural matters, particularly with regard to the size of its population, which is much smaller than that of the majority of French and European metropolises. Historically shaped by central state intervention, but endowed with a strong Breton and maritime identity, the city is developing largely through increased spending by local authorities and a profusion of initiatives from a highly structured local civil society. The university, as a national public entity with an ever-increasing autonomy, logically fits into this local landscape, and has been striving to expand its cultural and artistic activities since the early 2000s. The city's cultural partners are keen

to work with the UBO cultural service and consistently offer preferential rates for students in a bid to attract this difficult-to-reach public. An empirical survey begun in 2019 already attests to this relative disconnect between Brest's cultural vitality and the low presence of students in the local life, especially regarding undergraduates. In 2018, the Ministry of Culture launched the national programme "Pass Culture", an application providing 18 year olds with €300 of cultural vouchers for 24 months. It remains to be seen whether this initiative will boost the student presence in local culture venues as not all students sign up for this offer, and when they do, they tend to opt for digital cultural options rather than in-person attendance at local events. As the current situation stands, Brest already has a large student population but is not yet considered a student town in the traditional sense of the term. However, with the ongoing partnerships and continued efforts by the university, local authorities and industry, this perception may soon belong to the past.

Notes

1. In sound and pictures – Brest's candidacy

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