



Institutions of cultural intelligence and urban cultural policy. The case of the Cultural Observatory in the city of Gdansk

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Abstract: This paper addresses the cooperation of the City Culture Institute's Cultural Observatory in Gdańsk with academic community and the activities directed to universities' circles of that city. In the cultural ecosystem of the city, the cultural observatory is an intermediary, a space for dialogue and a bridge between the city, the officials who make decisions and the researchers who acquire and interpret data on cultural activities, creative processes, and cultural audiences' needs and deficits. Academics support systemic decision-making in urban cultural policies, strategic actions to develop cultural competences, and inhabitants' creative activities. In this area, universities usually do not act directly, but in cooperation with other institutions of knowledge, such as cultural observatories, that are much fluent in integration of theory and practice when applied in the domains of both cultural policy and cultural management.

Keywords: cultural observatory; urban cultural policy; city of Gdańsk; cultural intelligence; creative sectors..



We live in interesting times where city presidents or mayors keep books on their night tables about the creative class, the creative city and the creative economy, dreaming of creative, prosperous, talented and competitive citizens. But from where can they acquire knowledge about the ‘grammar’ of creativity, the specifics of creative processes and the functioning of artistic institutions? The essence of creative mindset is perhaps captured in the motto of one of Australia’s best universities: “question the answer!”. After all, it is difficult to consider as creative those cities in which the inhabitants unreflectively accept the status quo, routinely ‘answer the questions’, and copy ideas instead of creating -posing questions in the face of existing solutions- answers. The places naturally created to both question the status quo and experiment, are, on the one hand, art organizations and artists operating within or outside institutional frameworks and, on the other hand, academia, universities, researchers, students and critical explorers of knowledge and non-standard but effective solutions to serve city dwellers and visitors.

There are many concepts and stories about creative city as an idea. Many were attracted by the narrative on the creative class by Richard Florida. We were more inspired by Franco Bianchini and Charles Landry, as well as by the numerous projects of European research teams whose creative city concepts were immersed in the cultural policy research logic. These visions, more or less coherent and resistant to reality and the passing of time, would not have been possible without the tradition of a solid sociology of the city and cultural studies, the output of cultural urban studies and the study of tangible and intangible cultural heritage, as well as without the excellent work of many theorists and practitioners of urban planning and architecture, philosophers, aestheticians, historians or anthropologists of the city. In short, university people. In this regard, the intellectual output of the creative city is valuable and constantly inspiring. There is also a second dimension based on what these visions and thoughts embed in the practices of urban cultural policies. Here, inhabitants’ creativity all too often gets caught up in the rush of current circumstances regulated by local government terms of office and the rhythm of absorption of European funds or the city budget. The

language and vocabulary are different, close to management as an economic practice and far from management as the humanities - interpersonal communication. City dwellers, artists, local politicians, city councillors and municipalities employees sometimes stop understanding each other as they talk in different dialects and much gets lost in translation. Mediators and interpreters' roles are taken on by cultural observatories, which are organisations that act as a bridge between the city, artists, inhabitants, officials, city councillors and academia. They use and involve researchers and experts from universities but translate the results of their work into the practice of cultural management and cultural policies.

Universities are intergenerational transmitters of both the value of knowledge and its application in the practice of social life. They also encompass management practices in the cultural institutions and organisations involved in cultural activities. Academics support systemic decision-making in urban cultural policies, strategic actions to develop cultural competences and inhabitants' creative activities. In this area, universities usually do not act directly, but in cooperation with other institutions of knowledge and competence such as cultural observatories.

The subject of this paper is to describe activities carried out by the cultural observatory functioning as part of the municipal cultural institution –the City Culture Institute (CCI) located in Gdańsk– in cooperation with the academic environment of the city. In this system, the cultural observatory is an intermediary, a space for dialogue and a bridge between the city, the officials who make decisions and the researchers who acquire and interpret data on cultural activity, creative processes, and cultural audiences' needs and deficits.

What are cultural observatories and how they build their relations with municipal decision-makers, on one hand, with universities and research centres on the other, and with cultural audience and creators of cultural offer on the third? This question is addressed by Peter Inkei¹, who was surprised by the fact that cultural observatory was defined in the popular Wikipedia appears only in Polish. Cultural observatory is defined as an 'organization, a research network whose purpose is to monitor cultural policies, to collect statistical data and to conduct research work on the cultural sector. Moreover, the rationale for the existence of observatories is both the lack of public statistics in the field of culture and the

need to base cultural policies on knowledge'². Peter Inkei took a closer look at the role of cultural observatories, referring to the existing literature on the subject. Cultural observatories observe, describe, and analyse in real time signal changes and future trends, and monitor political activities. Besides, they influence and provoke political decisions. The scope in which observatories operate is fact-finding and impact or action for change. Cultural observatories bring together research institutions or academic centres, statistical offices, consulting companies and organisations that are change advocates. As the main objective of cultural observatories, Cristina Ortega Nuere³ identified the function of facilitating knowledge transfer and access to information and knowledge to support decision-making through information systems. Moreover, Michele Trimarchi⁴ pointed to the organisational models adopted by cultural observatories, which are extremely diverse, including institutions that are part of public administration and independent foundations. They can fulfil their role in terms of information and evaluation, but they can also develop guidelines to redesign cultural policies in their cities. Different cultural observatories' roles are crucial and sensitive.

Knowledge to support cultural management and the case of the city of Gdańsk

The cooperation between the CCI's Cultural Observatory in Gdańsk and cultural institutions was based on the idea of creating knowledge that could support decision making processes in those organisations, as well as their communication strategies or programme. They were meant to promote the audience development approach in local actors who create Gdańsk's cultural life. Some of the early projects were focused on a simple question: How does local audience look for the information about cultural events? The next project took a broader and more cooperative approach. One-year process engaged all cultural institutions placed in Gdańsk. Quantitative study during cultural events and in all institutions gave insight to specificity of each organisation's audience. Individual but coherent studies created a portrait of the cultural audiences' preferences, motivations and practices in Gdańsk. One of the aspects that promoted the collaborative spirit of this action was the insight to the flow of cultural audiences among local institutions with different

profiles (museums, galleries, cultural centres, theatres, music venues, philharmonics, and opera). The research study was empowered with regular meetings of communication managers and training programme, presenting various approaches and methods that gave participants tools to continue and deepen their individual studies.

A similar process focused on the cultural centres of the metropolitan area during the COVID-19 pandemic. Basic knowledge on audiences, e.g., their practices during lockdown and before the pandemic, was provided. Cultural managers took part in two training sessions: the first one to decide what knowledge they needed to plan their future actions, and the second one to work together on recommendations based on the findings and the possible actions for the time of periodical lockdowns and openings of cultural institutions.

In the pandemic, the Cultural Observatory in Gdańsk wanted to respond quickly to the needs of local cultural scene by both mapping the situation and feelings from the perspective of Gdańsk's cultural audiences and collecting the voices of local cultural actors in this dynamically changing situation. The first part of the study about culture in lockdown focused on online and offline cultural practices, the difference in experiencing culture, motivations, and patterns of participation. It aimed at understanding audiences to communicate with them and to sustain relations through art and cultural programme. The second study was a supportive action to make artists and cultural workers' needs visible (from both public institutions and NGOs). It was a time where decision makers in the city needed to continue their policy of supporting culture as an important collective value, but management tools were changed to answer to the new situation, i.e., specific knowledge and efficient communication with the local cultural environment were needed.

Diagnosis of local cultural sector and cultural participation

The beginning of the Cultural Observatory as part of the CCI in Gdańsk marks a collaboration with researchers from the Faculty of Social Science of the University of Gdańsk. A series of research projects called "Gdańsk Cultural Studies" started with the need to develop knowledge of the state of Gdańsk's culture from the perspective of different actors: creators, institutions, NGOs and participants of local cultural life. The aim was to

develop a background to build strong local cultural policies considering the elements involved in the cultural life of the city, the issues that should be solved, and the new trends that could lead to change. *The Expanding the Field of Culture* (2012)⁵ has searched for new phenomena in culture in relation to the dynamic changes partly connected to city's candidacy to the title of the European Capital of Culture. The study showed the fluidity of existing boundaries: between participants and creators, institutions from outside the cultural sector pursuing cultural goals, and traditional cultural institutions. We have also described the tendencies and development processes of contemporary culture: the „dictatorship of excess”, the increasingly strong links between culture and the economy, the influence of technology on circulation, and the circulation of culture.

The study and the recommendations were developed in collaboration with municipality representatives taking part in the “review” sessions of experts that were useful to critically discuss the findings and their potential influence on local cultural policy. Both the research model and the development process have been effective in keeping the academic and administration worlds together.

The collaboration resulted in two other studies: *Points of Contact: Between Culture and the Practice of (Non)Participation* (2013-2014)⁶ and *The Cultural Hierarchy. New Distinctions and Duties in Culture and Social Stratification* (2016)⁷. *Points of Contact* elaborated the answer to the question related to low participation in culture: Who is not participating in the culture offered by municipal institutions and why? What does it mean not to participate?

The study proposed a new approach to cultural participation that incorporates both visits in cultural institutions and bottom-up activities of broad culture, including participation in an increasingly significant domesticated and privatized culture. Sociability becomes important as an aspect that often gives meaning to cultural practices. Participation is associated today not only with education or financial opportunities, but also with the social situation of the individual. The most important obstacles to participation are loneliness, too absorbing professional or family relationships, immobility and spatial barriers (suburban, remoteness from the center). The way of understanding the category of cultural capital has also been redefined: not as a static set of competences, but as the ability to organize resources.

A third project on the relationship between social structure and cultural practices showed that traditional structural correlates greatly influence activities, but at the same time it is impossible to distinguish simple class models on their basis. The study allowed us to conclude that participation patterns are determined not only by social position, but also by relatively autonomous attitudes, beliefs or personality traits. As an outcome of the projects that could be helpful to cultural organisations, we proposed a catalogue of cultural participants' profiles in which their attitudes, motivations and practices were described.

These studies have been summarized and included in a book called *Game of Culture. Transformations of the Field of Culture in the Era of Expansion*⁸. Long lasting collaboration with cultural and social scientists has established good position in the field of cultural studies. However, the changes in academia has put an end to the collaboration in its previous form: the scientists from the University of Gdańsk have established their own Pomeranian Centre for Cultural Studies.

Action research for living better in Gdańsk's districts

Gdańsk's urban character is defined by its shape, i.e., a linear structure along the coast climbing (fast in the last 10 years) moraine hills. The city has gradually incorporated smaller towns and villages on its way. This process and the elongated shape of the city resulted in the division between districts and strong local identities despite dynamic fluctuations in city's population. The issue of transportation in that structure causes that the historical centre is not actually a city centre, and it can be hard to find one centre of city's life –we would rather see a series of local hubs placed along the main artery. "District-capital" is a motto often used by locals to characterise this urban lifestyle. One of the main goals of the CCI is to work within those local spaces, looking at them from different perspectives and activating its potential by art, culture and research. Some of our projects are based on an action research method that maps local DNA and empowers community in solving local issues, taking care of their neighbourhoods and strengthens their voices when discussing about their future in official city planning processes.

Przymorze, Zaspa and Żabianka –districts of Gdańsk, although somewhat forgotten yet significant in many

respects– were the subject of the Observatory's research cooperation with students and graduates of sociology at the University of Gdańsk. These places are the result of a great post-war architectural and urban project. Although today they are often perceived as a relic of the communist era, the size of the districts, the constantly increasing number of inhabitants and the attractive location next to the coastal areas are impressive. We were interested in how life is lived there today. We asked some questions: What places are important to people and which ones have untapped potential? How does the idea of post-war modernist urban projects (including districts' self-sufficiency) work now? Does infrastructure facilities, in the form of playgrounds, green areas, housing estates and cultural centres, fulfil its function?

Urb Cultural Planning⁹, an international project with its local demonstrator projects in Nowy Port and Stare Przedmieście (both Gdańsk's districts undergoing formal regeneration planned by the municipality) gave us the possibility to combine artistic actions with an insight to the local life and to test new methods of work. Mapping the socio-cultural network and character of these places, visioning their near and far future, and discussing and implementing the findings are cultural actions that brought together experts and students from both the Gdańsk University of Technology and the Academy of Fine Arts in Gdańsk, citizens, activists, artists, and decision makers from the city and regional administration.

That kind of research has a direct and indirect influence on public policies in fields of culture, urban planning, and social development. It is aimed at engaging both decision makers and residents in taking action for the benefit of living better in the districts mentioned. It gives an alternative to formal public consultation: more open and engaging formats. The role of cultural observatories or cultural institutions is to intermediate between those groups, to connect them, to translate official documents into living dialogue, and to break the fear of misunderstanding and the stereotypes about the actors of urban renewal. This role was difficult to be taken. Building trust of all the actors involved takes a lot more time than time span of granted projects. However, consistency of undertaking it may gradually change attitudes and balance of power in public decision making.

Urban space and creative city policy

In 2021, CCI has challenged itself by mapping creative places in Gdańsk, creating typology and finding factors that build places where creativity can thrive. This study was an opportunity to test both Charles Landry's theory of creative city and the idea of creative class described by Richard Florida. Researchers also wanted to include the ecosystem approach to study the creative industry, i.e., its actors and hubs.

Many cities in Poland have tried to achieve the status of creative city. Most major cultural centres in the country have studied and measured their creative index and estimated income from culture and creative industries. That analysis has been performed several times in Gdańsk, as well as in the context of the region, but few studies have been focused on the relationship between creative work and the place where it is applied. The research project called Creative Places aims at analysing this aspect at the urban system level by finding creative centres in the city, studying local ecosystems, and individual level, and knowing the motivations, needs and ties with the places from creators and artists' perspectives. The project describes the local characteristics of the places chosen by creative actors to work and tries to create a typology of these spaces in the city. Special attention has been paid to the core of creative industries (i.e., individual creators, artists, cultural producers and organisations representing public institutions, NGOs and businesses).

This project involved researchers from different fields: urbanists, sociologists, architects and cultural researchers. The interdisciplinary study coordinated by the CCI employed experts from local academia (the Gdańsk University of Technology, the University of Gdańsk and the Academy of Fine Arts in Gdańsk), but it also included a collaboration with experts from the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań. Part of the research actions took place during lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic, thus influencing the process in various ways. Firstly, creative workplaces changed because many work activities were transferred to home environment; moreover, some previously vibrant meeting places lost its atmosphere and connection with community due to lockdown. Secondly, the increased use of online communication and digital tools made it easier to collaborate in a mixed location team than ever before.

The study applied research tools from mixed science fields. Urbanists used cartographical analysis to map the locations of creative workplaces (in division for the core, cultural industries and broader creative industries) and their links with other industries. The architectural analysis and the characteristic of the places were based on visual studies and field recording during on site research. Individual in-depth interviews were used to understand the relationship with the place (room, neighbourhood, district, and city), the needs regarding workplace conditions, and the links with the local ecosystem.

The findings are aimed at contributing to the city's creative policy, which involves not only cultural strategies but also city planning and business development departments. In addition, they could complement the study of the creative sector's economic estimates in Gdańsk led by the city's department of culture¹⁰. By both focusing on the features of creative places and testing the creative class' preferences described by Florida, recommendations can be given to designers, architects, developers and investors who want to create such spaces. Its influence on the scale of the city lies in knowing the position of the creative spaces that emerged in the urban space. The policy of creating "cultural districts" in areas of urban regeneration can be tested, as well as the programmes developed to provide art studios for creators in municipal premises ("*Otwarte pracownię*", eng. Open Studios) led by the Department of Culture since 2017.

Far future foresight as strategic inspiration

In 2020, the CCI's Cultural Observatory joined forces with Infuture Institute, specialised in research concerning the future. The project was inspired by NARRACJE (narrations), an artistic festival organised every year by CCI in public spaces and in 2020¹¹ took a theme of Gdańsk 2080 – Futurological Congress. Research and artistic actions aimed at interpenetrating each other, and together stimulated awareness about today's responsibility for the city's future at an individual and collective level, thus influencing various fields of local policies.

Foresight is a method of strategic insight aims at preparing for the upcoming changes. The future scenarios used are a tool to better understand how you can function in a given reality. Therefore, they should not be treated as prophecies to be fulfilled but as a certain future vision, which allows possible opportunities and threats to be identified:

how to prepare for possible changes, especially if they are discontinuous changes (i.e., not constant phenomena and processes occurring in the past), how to develop the best strategy of action, and how to reach a consensus in the event of a difference of views.

What challenges will Gdańsk and its inhabitants face in the next 50 years? During a several-month foresight project, in which experts, officials and residents of Gdańsk (including social activists, artists and children) were involved, four future scenarios were developed: Socially sensitive technium, Plunged megapolis, Cooperative homeostasis, and Blue autonomy. The report¹² was supplemented by a list of twelve challenges for Gdańsk (divided into areas such as climate, economy, health, safety, food, community, and transport). We presented them in a set of 37 shift cards. Every card describes the challenge identified in the future scenario and encourages to reflect on potential solutions to the problem presented. The cards, along with instructions for their use, are available for self-printing in the test report to be used by organizations, individuals and city administration in their planning and strategic processes. The study was accompanied by a broad social campaign in the city's public spaces and local internet sites. Important decision makers, i.e., the president and deputies, heads of departments, big local businesses, developers and active NGOs, were presented with a set of cards to draw knowledge from them. Dense actions and information was crucial to stress the importance of the findings and to create a moment of reflection.

Gdańsk Lab¹³, an initiative that joins city officials who work in various departments in relation to the innovative forms of city management, arranged a workshop to reflect

on both the mapped challenges and the possible solutions that could be today implemented. Gdańsk is preparing itself to build a new city strategy. The knowledge acquired from the foresight study could strengthen the process and be used in stress testing current programmes and strategies in the eye of future social, economic, cultural or climate challenges, thus creating policies that would change both the future of the city and citizens' life.

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Epilogue

In 2009, the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage started a Cultural Observatory's grant programme to create knowledge that could feed the national cultural policy. Every year, the call for research proposals from many organisations (universities, municipalities, cultural institutions, and NGOs) were guided by the priorities picked by the policymakers. This inflow of financial support to the fields of cultural studies, cultural analysis and cultural observatories' research activities had a great impact. It created the conditions where research projects focusing on cultural practices, policies at different levels or new trends and phenomena were considered

as an important field of study, also valued for their influence on directions taken by public authorities. Until 2016 a robust scene of cultural research organisations, such as regional or city led cultural observatories and projects, has risen, thus creating many reports and new insights to the field. This atmosphere created opportunities for new cross sectoral partnerships between culture and academia, which started to build bridges

between the worlds of studies and practice. Yet there was a lot of to be done. The metanalysis of produced reports and diagnosis about the Polish cultural scene has pointed that about 35% of cultural managers in Poland knew the reports created by this programme, and only 28%¹⁴ was convinced about their practical value in cultural management.

Since the closure of the grant scheme in 2016, research projects have been centralised by national institutions, such as the National Centre for Culture, and divided into smaller local projects. Organisations such as the CCI's Cultural Observatory cannot access the research funds dedicated to formal academic entities or research centres, which leaves them to their own means in absence of public funding from cultural resources. The lack of central or local funds for cultural research projects has put an end to long lasting collaboration. Reforms at the Universities have changed academia's conditions and goals. Moreover, the collaboration with non-academic research centres is no longer beneficial to scientists who prefer to publish in journals and publishers from inside their field that give them more points in the evaluation system.

The Cultural Observatory in Gdańsk operates in a model with a small internal team in the institution (2 persons) supported by external experts representing different fields of science. In this model, collaboration is the catalyst of innovation and, at the same time, the only possible way to create knowledge. Long lasting partnerships with universities are vital but can change in time due to external dynamics: funding schemes, central educational system reforms and internal priorities of involved parties, such as individual shifts in direction of scientific interests of involved researchers. Short term collaborations with research agencies are based on the advantage of faster research processes and the bigger scale of research samples that they can reach or on unique research methods in which they are specialised. Even though this is a contract-based relationship with business character, the understanding of the subject of research, experience and trust are key values that guarantee good collaborations and valuable results.

After all, in the field of cultural policies and management, especially in the reality of public cultural institutions and the NGOs' cultural activities co-financed by taxpayers' funds, the relationship between universities and city halls, together with its subordinate institutions, is not the only

important aspect. What happens between the leaders of local communities, organizations and informal groups of citizens is more important than what happens in the office. On the other hand, systemic solutions, facilities, bridges, incentives, and favourable conditions for action are required to cooperate and to live together in cities. Unfortunately, these are rarely tailored to creative people's needs. Systems are inadequately shaped, like routine and mindless shortcuts. Structures need to be healed; systems need to be humanized. I wish for myself and for other citizens that officials would, on the one hand, reach for a professional diagnosis of the situation in the city and talk to people who are well versed in practice and theory. On the other hand, they should look for good, tailored tools to inspire institutions, organizations, circles and individuals ready for creativity and cooperation. It would be good if city hall's employees, supported by academic circles and expert teams of cultural observatories, were mediators and stimulators of the creative activities undertaken by residents, if they appreciated language far from new-fashioned jargon, and if they understood the essence of the creative process and the need for appropriate creativity conditions. It is not about making amateur and professional artists comfortable, but about creative balance, conditions for the coexistence of creative friction between what preserves, protects, preserves and what provokes to thinking, to change, to work with imagination, to new cognition and action, to mutual listening and cooperation of many environments and opinion centres in urban ecosystem of culture.

Notes

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6. A. Bachórz, et al. *Punkty styczne między kulturą a praktyką (nie)uczestnictwa/Points of Contact: Between Culture and the Practice of (Non)Participation*, Gdańsk: CCI 2014 <http://obserwatorium.ikm.gda.pl/projekty/punkty-styczne-miedzy-kultura-a-praktyka-nieuczestnictwa/> [Accessed 19.11.2021].

7. A. Bachórz et al. *Kulturalna hierarchia. Nowe dystynkcje i powinności w kulturze a stratyfikacja społeczna/Cultural Hierarchy. New Distinctions and Duties in Culture and Social Stratification*, Gdańsk: CCI, 2016.

8. A. Bachórz, C. Obracht-Prondzyński, K. Stachura, P. Zbieranek, *Gra w kulturę. Przemiany pola kultury w erze poszerzenia*, Gdańsk: CCI, 2019.

9. <http://obserwatorium.ikm.gda.pl/projekty/urb-cultural-planning/> [Accessed 19.11.2021].

10. Which was unfortunately suspended due to the COVID-19 situation.

11. Postponed to 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

12. Available via website www.gdanskprzyszlosci.pl [Accessed 19.11.2021].

13. A very valuable entity unfortunately lacking real funds and direct action, focuses mainly on the bottom-up change in the thinking of city management processes in the work environment of its members.

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