SPACES FOR CULTURE AT URBAN PERIPHERIES:
The case of Culture Stations and Novi Sad European Capital of Culture 2022

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Spaces for culture at urban peripheries: The case of Culture Stations and Novi Sad European Capital of Culture 2022

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Abstract

The rapid spatial growth of the city of Novi Sad resulted in a growing issue of centralisation of its cultural infrastructure. As a remedy, a network of Culture Stations was proposed. The project, governed by the Foundation NS2021, was realised within the Novi Sad European Capital of Culture title. The functioning of these cultural venues raises many important issues for cultural policy and management. First, as a very open platform for the cultural participation of citizens at large, it raises the question of the good balance between amateurism and professionalism. Many programmes are banal, socially irrelevant, and even overly private. What are the dangers of such populist management? Second, vague programming and management procedures also reveal issues surrounding another frequent assumption of cultural policies, which is that decentralised cultural infrastructure as such brings cultural democracy. What else is needed in terms of education and community building that can truly enable meaningful participation in cultural life? Third, this case shows the importance and value of sociological data, knowledge, and expertise for a socially relevant cultural policy. It also poses a question: what are other areas of cultural policy in which sociological research could play an important part?

Keywords: cultural policy, decentralisation, ECoC, cultural management, cultural participation, populist programming

Introduction

Access to culture has been an indispensable part of the cultural policymaking toolbox for decades (Tomka, 2013). As cultural democracy becomes more and more popular with cultural policymakers due to pressures from below (civil society) and above (often the EU), any method of bringing organised cultural life closer to citizens is gaining in importance. One of those is undoubtedly decentralisation.

As citizens move to bigger and bigger cities in search of work, education, and socialisation, more and more of cultural life is concentrated there, with growing areas devoid of cultural infrastructure and cultural offerings. Lack of cultural venues, institutions, sites, collections, artists, and cultural professionals makes organising cultural events very hard. When paired with a decreasing population, it sets the stage for very low public cultural participation. In turn, losing cultural habits further decreases audiences and contributes to a vicious circle of decreasing access to culture.

Therefore, decentralisation is considered one of the keys to combatting decreasing cultural participation. For example, together with *creativity* and *participation*, decentralisation has been one of the key criteria for assessing and evaluating a cultural policy by the Council for Cultural Co-operation at the Council of Europe (Council of Europe, 1990a). Likewise, a specialised Europe-wide network of initiatives advocating for urban decentralisation – Banlieues d'Europe from Lyon, France – has been functioning for decades, trying to attract the attention of policymakers to the problem of suburbs (Fr. *banlieues*).

It is thus believed that decentralisation measures within cultural policies are needed to counterbalance centralisation forces. However, decentralisation can be a very complex and elusive term, with many things counting as one. According to Kawashima (2004), decentralisation in the field of culture can refer to three distinct efforts. First, 'cultural decentralisation aims to promote 'fair' distribution of the arts to a wider population' (p. 5). This usually includes removing physical and social barriers, enabling and supporting artists and cultural events in general to diffuse, travel, and reach those that are not in the centre. This first aspect is particularly complex because it can be understood from various angles: geographical and spatial, aesthetic, social, and the like. Second, 'fiscal decentralisation, conceptually distinct from the above, refers to the diffusion of public expenditure in the arts and culture' (p. 6). On top of spending new money on cultural programmes, fiscal decentralisation has to take into account money already spent in the form of cultural infrastructure. Third, 'political decentralisation is about the diffusion of political and administrative power for making and implementing cultural policy' (p. 7).

These three efforts are of course related, since a decentralised system of cultural policy decision-making will most certainly distribute money and other resources in a much more dispersed way, and a more evenly distributed money flow for cultural events will probably bring more people from remote areas into contact with the arts. In all three cases, it is accepted that more decentralisation brings more cultural democracy and cultural participation. However, in the everyday practice of cultural policymaking and cultural management, decentralising is easier said than done. It is relatively hard to decide what kind of centralisation we are struggling against; which areas or which demography need to be taken into account when decentralising and spreading cultural infrastructure or cultural

offer; it is hard to establish clear baselines for centralisation; and finally, it is difficult to measure and evaluate what decentralisation brought.

This is why actual cases of decentralisation and widening cultural participation are always valuable, yet not so abundant in literature. This case study is written in the context of these policy developments and knowledge gaps.

Methodology

This study starts with the assumption that there is a need within cultural policy research for empirical analysis of existing attempts to democratise culture through decentralisation. Its aim is to shed light on a particular case of the city of Novi Sad in Serbia and its network of nine cultural venues (so-called Culture Stations) built with the intention of decentralising cultural offerings in the city and increasing the public cultural participation of citizens.

Most of the data was collected, archived, and analysed while key events were ongoing, that is, from 2014 to 2022. The key method for this case study was participant observation (DeWalt & DeWalt 2011). Apart from observation, informal discussions, correspondence, and similar exchanges, desk research involved collecting media articles and material related to the case, as well as other relevant policy and/or research documents about the case.

Within the framework of participant observation, my position as the author could be best explained as a 'peripheral membership role' (Adler & Adler 1994: 380). On the one hand, I did not assume any decision-making position, nor am I, at the time of writing this paper, in any way engaged with any of the mentioned institutions or processes. However, my role as advisor, researcher, and trainer has been prominent. It includes acquaintance with all key events and actors, as well as a certain level of influence that should not be downplayed but is far from the leading one.

Cultural policy context

As in many other European countries, cultural life in Serbia is characterised by a high level of centralisation. A vast network of small community cultural centres from the socialist Yugoslav era, which were distributed throughout the country, have been either privatised or closed in the last two decades. By far the largest number of cultural institutions, cultural venues, and cultural NGOs are situated in either Belgrade, Novi Sad or Niš, the three largest cities. The same is true for the distribution of public cultural funds for project funding, the accessibility of artistic education, and the like. However, even within these cities, cultural infrastructure is also centralised and mostly found in the city centres. Almost all public cultural institutions have been built in elite central locations, and private ones gravitate towards central zones as well. The same also holds true for independent cultural centers, leaving suburbs and remote parts of the city void of local cultural offerings and places to meet.

The city of Novi Sad takes great pride in its artistic and cultural heritage. Its local nickname (lasting from the 19th century to the present day) is the Serbian Athens, an homage to the fact that it was the seat of many of the first modern Serbian cultural institutions at the time when Serbs were living under either Ottoman or Habsburg rule. These include institutions such as the Serbian National Theatre and Matica Srpska (a complex cultural centre

containing a library, a publishing section, an art collection, a gallery, and the like). Over the 20th century, a whole range of new cultural institutions of all kinds were established in the city. Consequently, the city's cultural budget takes up a considerable part of the city budget (around 7 per cent in pre-ECoC times). Novi Sad is also home to many internationally acclaimed festivals as well as a reputable artistic scene.

Recently, the city has been facing rapid growth, both socially and geographically. The city's population increased from fewer than 200 thousand at the start of the 21st century to about 400 thousand two decades later. New dwellings were built around the central zones as well as on the other side of the Danube River. In these new settlements (the outer ring in the picture below), around one-third of the citizens live. At the same time, cultural infrastructure did not follow these urban and demographic developments. In the outer ring, there are no cultural venues, even though the city of Novi Sad, the Republic of Serbia, and the Province of Vojvodina (of which Novi Sad is the capital) govern a total of 30 public cultural institutions in the city's realm. Private cinemas, galleries, music venues, and one theatre, also follow the logic of high traffic and the attraction of locals and tourists to the centre, and the same is true for independent cultural centres. Even festivals, which can more easily relocate, gravitate towards more central zones (the pedestrian zone, central parks, etc.).
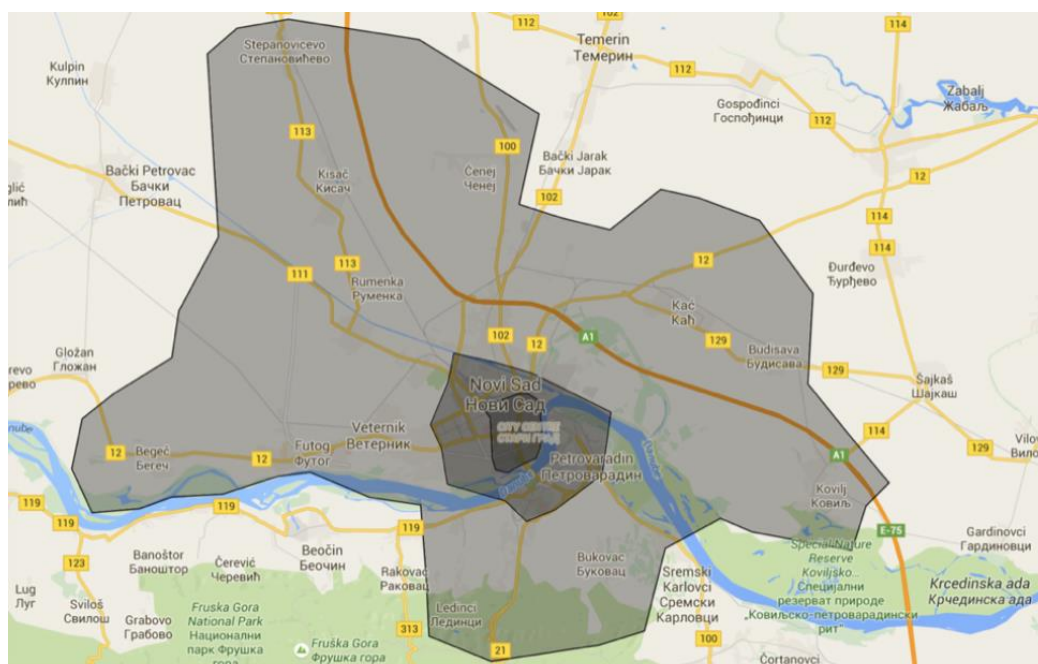
Map of Novi Sad: The outer ring of the city (in pale grey) is home to one-third of the citizens, yet, before this initiative, almost no cultural venues existed in this vast suburban area.

As mentioned before, the spatial centralisation of cultural venues is not the only aspect of centralisation the city is experiencing. Decision-making on the funding and financing of cultural activities is also highly centralised within the city administration. Cultural institutions have a certain autonomy in deciding their own programs and budgets, but those are also overseen by the central city administration or provincial administration, with very little space for any kind of undesirable content. Consequently, all that is shown in cultural institutions is primarily focused on highbrow, elite culture. This is another aspect of

centralisation: there is no platform or decision-making mechanism that is at arm's length (or further) from the central administration.

When it comes to civil society organisations, annual calls for projects distribute public funds to non-institutional actors in culture, and the situation is somewhat better in that realm. Between 100 and 200 civil society organisations win project grants every year to produce different kinds of events and cultural offerings. Those are somewhat wider in an aesthetic sense and can also reach out somewhat further in a geographical sense. However, knowing that these civil society organisations are mostly amateur, volunteer-based organisations, they simply cannot replace the lack of a more stable, long-term, and elaborate cultural offer by cultural institutions.

Coming to life of Culture Stations

Taking all that was previously said into consideration, it might come as a surprise that the issue of the centralisation of city cultural infrastructure, and consequently its accessibility, has not been a concern among city cultural professionals. In the research that preceded the creation of the city's first cultural planning document (Tomka et al., 2016), cultural professionals were asked to choose five issues (out of a list of 27) that were, from their viewpoint, most important in the city. Centralisation came out as the 26th issue out of 27 (what topped the list were political pressures on cultural professionals, insufficient funds for contemporary arts, and public funding of spectacle entertainment events).

The initiative for grounding city cultural policy on decentralisation (as one of the cornerstones) came through the process of preparing the European Capital of Culture (ECoC) bid for the city. In 2013, a coordinating team was formed to oversee a participatory process of brainstorming issues and ideas for the future bid. The team was led by arts manager Natali Beljanski, with architect Darko Polić and me as the remaining two members. In the team's first report and policy recommendations, one of the key proposed interventions was a network of Cultural Service Stations (Beljanski et al., 2014). This was not a bottom-up proposal from other professionals (as illustrated by the survey to come). Nevertheless, we saw these culture stations as a flagship project that could easily illustrate what ECoC investment in culture could bring both to cultural professionals and audiences.

At the beginning, 'Cultural Service Stations' were about geographical decentralisation as much as about creating arm's-length cultural infrastructure that would support the blooming of independent, autonomous artistic initiatives. Cases of such community-run venues in Berlin were an early inspiration. The idea was to create a series of public-civil partnerships in which the city would offer space and cover basic running costs, while consortiums of local civil society organisations (CSO) in the arts and other areas would oversee running the space with a specific mandate they had proposed and agreed to with the city at the time of setting up partnerships. The city would transfer programme and staff costs to partners, while CSOs would get access to decision-making and production at a local venue. Partnerships would be evaluated annually and renewed or cancelled every five years. The idea was that, in that way, these venues would not only spread city cultural infrastructure but also (1) contribute to the diversification of cultural offerings and consequently speak to different citizens; (2) empower smaller cultural organisations and raise their capacities to produce, fundraise, and develop audiences. For this reason, it was proposed that different stations focus on different programmes and content depending on their local context.

Early reception of the idea was mildly positive. Decentralisation and democratisation are hard to argue against, and many smaller initiatives supported such developments, though with caution. At the same time, very few people saw it as a high priority. This is visible in the first version of the Bidbook from 2015, in which none of the members of the initiating team took part. Decentralisation was mentioned only in passing as one of the values of the application, while stations were neither mentioned nor developed as a concept.

The NS 2021 final Bidbook (a binding one) from 2016, however, featured Culture Stations as one of the flagship projects. One of the reasons for this was positive feedback from the European panel of experts in the selection process. The other was the inclusion of one member of the initial team (Darko Polić) in the new team. Third, the time of the writing of the final Bidbook coincided with the already mentioned research (Tomka et al., 2016) and the process of working on the long-term City Cultural Strategy document (City of Novi Sad, 2016), for which I was a lead coordinator and author. And in those processes, decentralisation, as well as increased autonomy of cultural venues and actors, played a key role.

Still, the scope of the Culture Stations intervention in the final Bidbook was modest, and management details were not developed (NS2021, 2016):

> *We plan to open 3 new culture stations on the city outskirts that would support the cultural development of several neighbourhoods. Each space would be run by one community worker while the programmes would be mainly run by local organisations and artists.*

In the autumn of 2016, Novi Sad celebrated the awarding of the future European Capital of Culture title. After the city won the title, the creation of the envisioned network commenced and continued until 2022 and beyond.

It can be theorised why the Culture Stations were accepted (and further enlarged beyond any previous proposal). I would posit that there were several factors that played well together. First, in light of the expected evaluation of the European Capital of Culture, the city administration wanted to operate in a very open, democratic way (for more on this, see Tomka and Kisić, 2018). In such a context, proposing a network of semi-autonomous cultural venues in the suburbs shows both democratic competence (which is considered a key 'European value') as well as the readiness and devotion to experiment, invest, and have confidence in the cultural sector.

Second, having cultural infrastructure so centralised in the demographic map of the city is never a desired image for policymakers. Consequently, research done before the nomination, together with a fair amount of advocacy, 'nudged' the decision-makers in that direction.

Third, the team that was writing the application lacked a socially substantial programme and a concept that would be not only artistically relevant but also in terms of the everyday life of citizens (as has been communicated to me by the project lead in private correspondence). Culture stations came to the rescue in this regard and fitted well with both European expectations and local circumstances.

Finally, but not less importantly, in the political demography of the city, suburbs that were to receive new cultural infrastructure played (and still do) a very important role for the then (and still) dominant political party, the Serbian Progressive Party. Their voters came much more from these settlements than from central urban zones (and still do; see 021.rs, 2022 for the latest parliamentary elections). Since 2016 was a year of local elections, offering cultural infrastructure was one more way for the ruling party to show gratitude to their voters. This will be discussed further later, but here I just want to note the populist potential of cultural decentralisation.

Functioning of Culture Stations

The City of Novi Sad, the Republic of Serbia, and the Province of Vojvodina have invested considerable financial resources in enabling the nine local Culture Stations. Official data is still not available, but the CEO of Foundation NS2021 (the governing body) recently announced that ECoC has brought 40 thousand square meters of new cultural venues in the shape of Culture Stations (RTV, 2023). Some of them were built from scratch, some required serious restoration, and some of them just required the opening of new working places and funding for programs.

As seen from the illustration below, Culture Stations are quite well distributed throughout the city. In that respect, their geographic distribution is without a doubt guided by the clear idea of decentralisation. This can also be seen in the statements of the officials (NS2021):

> *For a very short time, culture has reached even the most remote parts of the city, and that is best seen through Culture Stations in Bukovac, Rumenka and Klisa. In that way, by decentralising culture, every citizen is involved in new cultural images of our city.* (City Mayor, Miloš Vučević)
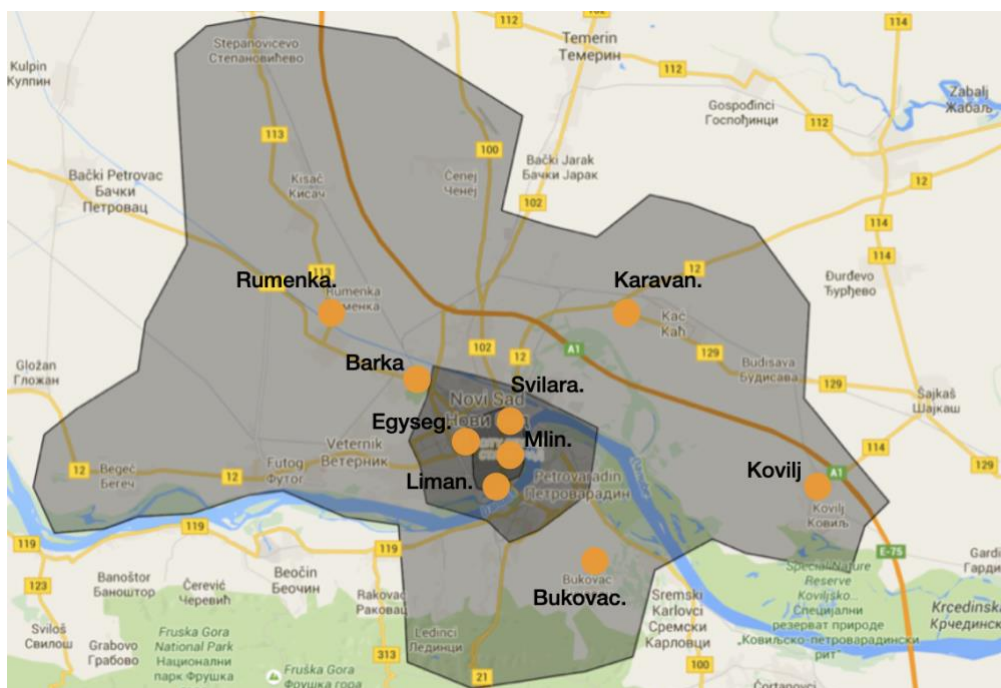
Distribution of Culture stations: Nine Stations (including one mobile, caravan-style venue) are placed mostly in the outer ring of the city, while those that are closer to the centre have a different programming approach.

The Foundation Novi Sad, the European Capital of Culture is primarily in charge of the overall management of Culture Stations. Within the Foundation, one employee (Violeta Đerković) is the coordinator of all stations. Every station also has a local coordinator and various arrangements when it comes to the running team. Some stations were initiated in cooperation with already-existing citizen initiatives and independent cultural centres. An example of such stations would be the most popular one, Svilara, which was developed together with CSO Almašani, a community-run organisation working on the revitalisation of Almaš quarter, in which the station is set up (for more on that case, see Đerković, 2022), or station Mlin, which continues the work of Workers University.

When it comes to programming, Culture Stations have different and differing programming. Since they were built and opened consecutively over five years (from 2018 to 2022), their programming changed over time as well. However, for this brief overview, there are two dominant programming logics. One is bottom-up, and takes place when local initiatives, CSOs, artists, and other neighbourhood actors approach a Station. They first send a formal inquiry about the availability of space. The Foundation then decides if the proposed activity is acceptable. Following that, applicants engage in conversation with the local station coordinator (or a team), who supports the collaboration. The other logic is a top-down one in which the Foundation sends a programme to a station. These programmes are either already funded and planned within the ECoC BidBook or based on some new ideas coming from local, national, or international collaborations. In any case, the main guiding principle is to offer as many different programmes as possible in order to support both the local artistic scene and citizen cultural participation.

Finally, communication channels and procedures have also changed over time, with stations having more autonomy in the beginning to set up their own Facebook pages and similar. In 2020, a joint website for all stations was launched. This is how Foundation CEO Nemanja Milenković described the role of the outlet (021.rs, 2020):

> *In this way, the actors of the local cultural scene, as well as organisations and artists outside of Novi Sad, have been given better access and insight into the possibilities open to them for the realisation of their content. Also, the end users, that is, the audience, can now be informed about events in different parts of our city and outside it, which is again a new segment of cultural decentralisation.*

Analysis and reflection on the impacts of Culture Stations

The way of managing, programming, and promoting Culture Stations discussed above opens many important questions for cultural policy and management. What follows are the key takeaways from this case study, with a focus on those particularly relevant for the INVENT project.

First, this case shows that centralised cultural infrastructure can be tackled even by a relatively poor public authority. On the political side, democratisation and decentralisation can have a strong appeal to both the public and policymakers. On the financial side, through refurbishments, reuse, and reshuffling of resources, new venues can be opened, especially in remote areas, due to lower rents. In turn, such new infrastructure can reinvigorate cultural life in many areas and repay the public and political trust given to it.

Second, as a very open platform encouraging everyone to take part, not only in attending but also in proposing programmes in these venues, this case opens a question of quality. It is usually declared that more (cultural) participation and more active participation are always good for (cultural) democracy. However, populism, a feared 'shadow of democracy' (Canovan, 1999), lurks in the back of many participatory programmes. Delegating a venue's programme to an open inquiry form could easily be both cultural democracy and 'cultural populism' (McGuigan, 1992). Namely, just the fact that a programme has been proposed by 'the people' does not necessarily grant it the democratic stamp. If many programmes are banal and socially irrelevant, or even private, then they are not in fact serving the public. This is the issue of finding a good balance between amateurism and professionalism, between bottom-up proposals, selection, and curating. The evaluation of thousands of programmes that have happened in Culture Stations in the last five years is beyond the reach of this article. However, what can be questioned is the decision of the Foundation to have no elaborate selection process, a conceptual guideline, or anything similar, but rather to leave a big part of programming to 'the people' in an open form. The assumption here is that people know best what they need, and that is what makes this approach potentially populist.

In a classically populist manner, it is also neglected that such open forms will possibly be used by those actors who are more assertive and have more resources to negotiate the use of space, and that this might just serve to reproduce social hierarchies instead of undermining them, which would be a democratic responsibility. In the case of Culture Stations, we also see that openness to citizens is used as leverage to place top-down programmes of any kind, following some pragmatist approaches. In an implicit agreement with the public, along the principle of 'you play what you want, we play what we want', the Foundation creates space to use these public resources for its own negotiations with interested parties (for example, with a foreign embassy or another donor requesting some exhibition that might not be relevant for the community, in return for a donation or support of some kind). This adds to the vagueness of these spaces and undermines their democratic value. For a space to be considered and recognised by audiences as a place to visit and expect experiences, learning and joy, it needs to have a recognisable identity, which is built through responsible programming. Hence, the approach applied in this case leads to the questions: does democracy necessitate the 'death of programming' and what are the dangers of 'populist programming'?

Third, vague programming and management procedures reveal issues surrounding another assumption of cultural policies, which is that decentralised cultural infrastructure as such brings cultural democracy. It is worth remembering that Culture Stations are run only at the coordination level. There are no curators, pedagogues, community managers, or cultural mediators who could evaluate and present programmes in the manner that would be most relevant for communities. Again, there seems to be an assumption that people will use the infrastructure for their own benefit in the best possible ways. However, can that be fully trusted? This question does not concern only possible misuses but also the fact that selecting a relevant artistic or cultural programme in the sea of possibilities requires knowledge, not only space. In the case at hand, the choice has been to overstretch the infrastructure (going from three to nine cultural venues) without following it with employees. This opens the important question of what is needed beyond infrastructure – in

terms of education, community building, sensitisation and the like – to truly enable meaningful participation in cultural life?

Finally, this case shows the importance and value of sociological data, knowledge, and expertise for a socially relevant cultural policy, but only when and if such knowledge is placed and presented in a meaningful way. Namely, the key argument for this large investment came from the research on cultural participation in the city of Novi Sad implemented during the creation of the Strategy for Cultural Development of Novi Sad 2016-2026. This research indicated that most cultural content and public cultural institutions take place in the very centre of the city, while numerous areas, neighbourhoods and suburbs remain without cultural content. The idea of Culture Stations was finally adopted in response to such research and its representation of public value. However, it is also important to notice that the research in question had a very participatory design and that a lot of effort has been put into communicating its results beyond the usual academic or policy-making venues.

Conclusion

Overall, the case of the Culture Stations of Novi Sad is an interesting example of city cultural policy aimed at decentralising cultural life and reaching out to citizens in suburbs and peripheries, while at the same time using neglected buildings and engaging in adaptive reuse of heritage assets. However, infrastructure and access to it should not be equated with cultural democracy; more ingredients are needed to run a responsible cultural policy that can stand apart from cultural populism.

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