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Salzburg, Austria (photo is posted on the Website : <https://www.grafenegg.com/>)

The Rural Dimension of Spaces for Culture Creative City

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Abstract

Culture policies and development plans for rural and urban contexts are equally important and will differ in most cases. Rural spaces are not homogeneous, and each culture policy development requires an understanding of the framework and of the specific needs and challenges of the area targeted.

When searching for common features of rural areas, the factor of density as well as quantity and quality of interaction is crucial, which also influences the design of culture policy and support instruments. Furthermore, fundamental policy decision concerns the orientation towards a more or less centralised approach— for example, in the sense of attracting an increasing number of rural audiences to the cultural offer in the (nearby) urban area.

The opportunities for participation in cultural events and creative activities are, in most cases, more limited for the rural population than for those persons living in cities. Nevertheless, most rural areas dispose of a wide range of (unconventional, potential) culture-related spaces (e.g. the local museum or the cultural landscapes). Models to use these spaces and venues are manifold as well as tools to enhance the participation of the local population as a range of examples from Europe demonstrate.

Keywords : culture, creative spaces, rural territories, non-urban areas, Covid-19, cultural policy

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Dachstei, Austria
(photo is posted on the Website : <https://pixabay.com/>)

The non-urban spaces in Europe are characterised by a wealth of types of territories including agricultural, mountainous, and transition areas like the peri-urban spaces. According to EUROSTAT data,¹ only 40.4 percent of Europe's population live in cities. With the EU aiming for a more balanced territorial development, more attention is paid to non-urban, rural and peri-urban areas in recent years.

A common feature of these territories is the reduced density in terms of number of inhabitants, and of cultural institutions which in most cases also include a lower number of interactions. The overall lower density constitutes most often a strategic disadvantage for rural areas in terms of the number of visitors they can attract,² the ecosystems provided for creative entrepreneurs and the innovation climate. Furthermore, cultural participation requires more efforts in these areas than in urban metropolises in which cultural offers are within easy and fast reach.

The patterns of participation from rural populations in culture differ from urban cultural consumption. EUROSTAT data³ on cultural participation (the demand-side) provides an analysis of cultural participation in relation to the degree of urbanisation: "More than two thirds (68.7 percent) of the EU-28 population (aged 16 years or more) living in cities reported in 2015 that they took part in cultural

1. EUROSTAT, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Archive:Statistics_on_rural_areas_in_the_EU.

2. Nota bene: Also rural areas can face serious over-tourism challenges like well-illustrated by the village of Hallstatt in Austria which found already considerable attention in academia e. g. Benner, M., "Overcoming overtourism in Europe: Towards an institutional-behavioral research agenda," <https://www.degruyter.com/view/journals/zfw/64/2/article-p74.xml>.

3. EUROSTAT, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Culture_statistics_-_cultural_participation#Cultural_participation_by_degree_of_urbanisation.

activities. This was higher than the rates for people living in towns and suburbs (63.9 percent) or rural areas (56.8 percent), likely reflecting the relatively high proportion of cultural venues that are located in or around cities." Furthermore, most of rural participation was directed toward live performances.

The main common features of the rural populations—still recognising the wealth of territories and frameworks—are: a lower degree of female, and a higher share of older and lower-educated populations compared to their urban counterparts. Related to the lower-education features, it is also observed that there is a strong correlation between the highest educational grade of parents and the cultural participation of children (Schönherr and Oberhuber 2015). For example in Austria, the share of inhabitants with Higher School Certificate in rural areas is just 23 percent, compared to 43 percent in urban territories. Yet, the rural areas seem to be catching up in a fast pace. The share of inhabitants in rural areas with academic degree between 1971 and 2014 was tenfold, while in urban areas only fivefold (Gartner and Hametner 2017). This shows a potential for increased cultural participation in non-urban areas, but it still raises the question how to best provide appropriate cultural settings in these lower-dense areas.

Cultural offer and demand play a crucial role and constitute two interconnected push buttons. The consumption of culture can be accelerated by investing in local cultural offers which improve the accessibility of culture for rural populations which can be further enhanced with targeted audience development strategies. The Valencia region in Spain is one of many related public practices in which a decentralisation of the cultural offer and infrastructures was also used for strengthening urban-rural synergies (Ruiz-Martinez and Esparcia 2020). Another very successful intervention is the festival "Kulturelle Landpartie" in Germany, which was able to network more than 130 cultural organisations developing around 1.000 events and mobilising annually 60,000 visitors to a rural area.⁴

The production of culture, creative goods and services can imply amateur and professional offers which might be targeted for selling (market-orientation) or for social cohesion of the rural populations—as provided by many volunteer (cultural) organisations. The European Creative Hubs, a Europe-wide network, covers a wide range of territories and settings including creative access point in smaller cities and towns. It pursues the following main objective: "The European Creative Hubs Network is a peer-led network with a mission to enhance the creative, economic and social impact of hubs around Europe and neighboring countries. As focal points for creative professionals and businesses, hubs offer the most effective way to support the growth and development of cultural and creative industries."⁵ As the network specifically addresses creative hub managers, it is able to generate considerable cross-border and EU-wide peer-learning effects which have the potential to positively impact cultural development in the respectively covered territories.

4. <https://www.kulturelle-landpartie.de/>.

5. <http://creativehubs.net/>.

Furthermore, cultural (and rural) policy objectives interfere into the local cultural settings outside urban territories, depending if these policies are rather decentralised or centralised. The guiding principles of such policies may include the valorisation of rural areas (e.g. Cultural heritage-based tourism offers) or initiatives to enhance the participation of rural populations in urban cultural offers. Beside the “traditional” policy makers, the enhanced cooperation inside the European Union has generated further layers of cultural development with the EU rural development programmes.⁶ These funding programmes were, inter alia, also used to reinvent cultural and creative tourism in rural areas in European Union. The project “Cultrips,”⁷ for example, was based on the cooperation of rural areas and cultural operators from Italy, Austria, Luxembourg, Estonia, and Finland to reinvent creative and slow tourism with unusual offers and insights in rural cultural and artistic life.

Bearing in mind these different features and policy options of rural areas, spaces for cultural activity to be privileged might vary considerably from one territory to another. Which kinds of cultural spaces are available in many rural areas? These can be local museums or community houses, open air stages and villages squares. Many rural territories possess interesting (man-shaped) cultural landscapes which might be understood and used as cultural spaces. Recent trends also show an increased use and re-use of empty premises in many villages, including abandoned industrial sites as one of the most common examples. The Lichtspiel Allentseig⁸ in most northern part of Austria developed from an abandoned cinema building to an over-regional center for media, arts and culture. It provides a multimedia infrastructure for the development of meaningful projects which are the result of co-creation processes. There is an association in charge of coordinating a rich programme, and promoting events which include workshops and training.

Developing these spaces can raise specific questions related to accessibility and equipment. There are questions about available public transport, opening hours reflecting on the specific time-patterns of rural populations (like time restriction of those commuting to the urban centres for work), and the technical equipment of these spaces especially in terms of the (increased) need of digital connectivity, which became more paramount during the 2020 pandemic.

When establishing and further developing rural cultural spaces, securing and ensuring a critical mass of potential visitors is a central question. Seasonality of visitors is challenging, especially with the low density of permanent residents in the rural areas. This presents a problem of generating sustainable revenues and of potentially high dependency on (public) financial support to maintain these cultural rooms. Motivations from public or private funders to invest in rural cultural spaces can differ considerably and might include political objectives (e.g. decentralisation and a more balanced development of the territory of a country including delocalisation), historical objectives (e.g. the relevance of a rural territory for telling

the story of a nation or of a company), personal objectives due to family ties in certain non-urban areas, as well as a wide-range of other objectives (e.g. tourism promoters choosing an area because of their excellent accessibility). Once a cultural infrastructure or space is established—in the best case already based on a long-term concept and participatory approach—the programme and content development become the core question, including related special cultural management challenges in rural areas (e.g. the lack of skilled cultural managers willing to work in a rural context often not being the most promising step for a career). A more sustainable financing might be to include crowdsourcing and crowdfunding, which can also lead to a very positive side-effect of generating ownership of local cultural initiatives, increased interaction of the local population reinforcing well-being, and the sense of belonging to a community of friends with common interests.

Rural cultural development implies a wide range of specific challenges, but also opportunities for more balanced territorial settings. Due to the transformations induced by the 2020 pandemic, rural or peripheral areas could benefit from inbound migration if they are able to provide a sustainable setting of cultural features, social cohesion, economic (digital) connectivity and healthy environments.

6. https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/policy/themes/rural-development/.

7. <https://cultrips.org/>.

8. <http://lichtspiel.at/>.

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