

Managing and Working in Project Society¹

Grass Root Involvement in a Mega Program

By Tomas Blomquist, Nils Wåhlin and Rolf A. Lundin

For several years, the European Union has annually appointed a city in Europe to be the European Capital of Culture. Lately two different cities have in fact been chosen for each year in order to promote the development in the regions of the EU member states. For 2014 the cities were Riga in Latvia and Umeå in northern Sweden. Cities apply for the title by presenting a preliminary plan for how they are to prove that they deserve the honor to be the European Capital of Culture and the plans are scrutinized by EU officials visiting the city applicants in the competition. It is not only an honor to be selected, but the cities chosen will also receive financial resources from the union in order to carry through efforts related to the title.

The two cities used different approaches to select activities to prove themselves worthy of the nomination. In Riga, the politicians in charge chose a set of activities with which Riga should demonstrate that they were devoted to culture and worthy of the selection. A top-down procedure was used, almost of a mega project type (cf. Van Marrewijk, 2015), where decisions about activities and resources were made by the city top government handing over the concrete work and the responsibilities to cultural administrators working for the city government.

The Umeå approach selected was almost the opposite, i.e. more of a bottom-up character where the initial step was to invite individuals from citizens-at-large, associations, companies, etcetera to submit suggestions for activities to prove the city worthy of the culture title. The effort received a lot of publicity with the help of local newspapers, TV programs and the like. A main idea revolves around the notion of co-creation; how to involve as many citizens as possible in different activities and projects. Co-creation became an important criterion for making choices between projects to be included in the program.

The range of various projects suggested to be potential parts of the program for the year was impressive and the question “what is culture” was debated a lot with an open mindset. To mention just one suggestion to demonstrate the open attitude: “How have birds moving south during the winter period changed their migrating behavior in terms of routes and time resulting from climate changes?” An interesting project, but it had an inherent difficulty – it was not evidently related to culture. But instead of rejecting the project it was used as a

¹ This series of articles from members of the Swedish Academy is based on the concepts in the book [Managing and Working in Project Society](http://www.pmworldlibrary.net) by Rolf A. Lundin, Niklas Arvidsson, Tim Brady, Eskil Ekstedt, Christophe Midler and Jorg Sydow, published by Cambridge University Press in 2015. The book won the PMI David I. Cleland Project Management Literature Award in 2016.

project for place-marketing. Birds normally return to the same location year after year and in that way the birds showed the way to the European Capital of Culture.

Cities in the neighborhood of Umeå were also activated in various ways promoting cultural events to take place in the year of 2014. The effort was conceived as one promoting the northern region of the country. There were also efforts to combine activities with Riga, but the outcome from the collaborative effort between the two cities was meager.

The Sami Ingredient

One of the key special reasons for Umeå winning the competition between cities was the connection to the indigenous people living in the northern parts of Norway, Finland, Russia and Sweden in an area called Sapmi. Umeå is a part of Sapmi and the Sami people is a part of the northern community as one of few indigenous people in Europe. Traditionally the life of the Sami people (who move around with the reindeers as a way of their cattle raising) is circulating around how reindeers have to be taken care of to preserve the need for nourishment. In order to follow the movement of reindeers, the Sami people are dividing the year in eight different seasons.

The eight seasons gave the Capital of Culture year a natural structure and fits with wild-life and the persons that are doing outdoor activities. Locally this gave turbulence in the Sami community. Some even said that the organizers exploited the Sami community which was else neglected or even counteracted by the Swedish authorities. Groups outside the Sami community felt that Umeå is not a part of Sapmi. Some voices were even saying that participating in the year of culture was not in the Sami interest.

We believe that it is appropriate to say that the Sami culture and its origins had a large influence on the EU decision to make Umeå the European Capital of Culture. In the selection of projects that were undertaken the Sami content was fairly noticeable as well, in particular at the spectacular opening of the year with celebrations and events taking place at the big river which runs through the city. The river was at that time, in the beginning of the year, covered with ice and with a width of 300 meters it is impressive. The opening was broadcasted and shown on television not only in Sweden but also around the world. Further it gave the non-Sami population in Sweden both nationally and locally a better understanding of the Sami culture. At the present time, there is a surge of activities related to Sapmi. This could for example be seen as positive reactions on a movie production, the film "Sami Blood" that became a large hit on the film scene 2016-2017.

The movie made people in general aware of the harassment of the Sami people historically and made Swedes in general sympathetic to Sapmi. At that, there have been special TV programs on Sami weddings, cooking and general Sami culture to an unprecedented degree. The outcome of the Sami ingredient in the European Capital of Culture year was useful in at least a couple of ways. It was most likely an important ingredient for the EU decision and as a side effect it multiplied Sapmi cultural expressions enacting that the future for the Sami minority might look a bit brighter.

The Final Program and Its Effectuation

It would take us too far to describe and examine all the projects housed under the total program. There were lots of separate projects carried through during the year, producing local debates, some of them related to that too much money was used during the year in the cultural effort leading to a lack of money for future cultural events. In general, the tax payers were fairly happy however, with not too much opposition or bad thoughts after the year.

The results from turning portfolio and program management upside down had interesting effects for Umeå. Other cities that have been nominated and accepted as European Capitals of Culture have had similar culture management structures as Riga: A strong organization that organizes the majority of projects in the program. Often with an external director that is hired for the year. Umeå did this differently.

The politicians were well aware that resources were limited, so there was a need for utilizing available resources as best you can. Further the aim of the year was to promote the city development and to work on the legacy of the year. This implied that using an in-house well-established director dedicated to promoting co-creation in a team based manner by empowering as many local actors as possible was good for the future development.

Selecting a co-creation approach with the majority of projects independently outlined had of course risks. Larger projects were sponsored up to 40%. By using seed money for smaller projects to start up larger projects or to create small events across the year, projects multiplied extensively in an almost serendipitous way. Out of the larger projects the central Project Management Office (PMO) only fully owned about ten projects. The rest or about 200 projects and thousands of minor events were fully managed and controlled outside the PMO. The PMO just coordinated and controlled that they kept the budget and the activities within the larger scope of the aims of the European Capital of Culture year. Working with this type of program management is described in an article by Näsholm and Blomquist (2016) and further explored in a book by Wåhlin et al. (2016).

What can be learned?

In a sense, the approach used in Umeå was very democratic in a Nordic tradition. It has been said that the Nordic approach to project and program management is different from the approach used in the Anglo-Saxon part of the world in the sense that it is relying less on an omnipotent project manager and instead makes use of the whole team (Wenell, 2001). In Umeå the grass roots were invited to contribute with ideas creatively without too much of interventions. Grass roots were also taking part in making practical events implemented.

On the other hand, there was a need for an overall management of the entire program to keep the total effort within the limits of financial resources at the same time as major projects in fact had been decided on by politicians beforehand just to make sure that they would go through. One major project which received a lot of attention concerned a cultural building at the shore of the river.

The cultural building was not a part of the PMOs budget and planning but in the minds of most citizens it was connected to the European Capital of Culture effort. In the minds of the politicians it was also related but in the sense of culture-driven growth of the city in general. The management team of the PMO tried its best to articulate that the building is not a part of the program. Although it was constructed simultaneously, the discussion to build a house of culture had been on the local agenda for more than 15 years before as a part of the City between the bridges initiative and the urban design as a whole. Stakeholders mixed the two initiatives that were related by topic but not explicitly included in the management of European Capital of Culture program. Citizens were not able to see them as separate activities and this led to an intense local debate. The fact is also that many of the activities had been conceived ages ago and they were activated as part of the European Capital of Culture in a combined manner.

A wide program of this type gives rise to emotions and activities which will affect in various ways the long-term development of the city and its activities. Some of the effects will definitely show as value changes (cf. use of the Sami events) but also in terms of affecting physical constraints and opportunities when projecting the urban design for the future.

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