

Competition for Capital of Culture in Portugal

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In the 20-year period between 1994 and 2012, Portugal had three cities awarded the status of European Capital of Culture: Lisbon in 1994, Porto in 2001 and Guimarães in 2012. Each of them was integrated into a country-specific temporal, political and cultural context, aligned with the state's political guidelines directed towards strategic investment in culture and culture values, which were understood to be priorities in applications and action plans. These cultural and political experiences had some results in national and local territories, cultural and creative sector, and political discourses and practices: they led to greater attention on the relationship between development, culture, community and territory.

Building on these experiences, Portugal will have a fourth European Capital of Culture in 2027. From the twelve cities that submitted applications in November 2021, the pre-selected cities were: Aveiro (with the proposal "The Fifth Element"), the winner Braga ("Time for Contemplation"), Évora ("Vagar") and Ponta Delgada ("Natureza Humana").

The cases chosen were proposals for action with a long-term culture-oriented development strategy. They are examples of cultural administrations that integrate different social and cultural actors, and matrices of values in relation to culture. They integrate the trends observed about cultural values, observe virtuosities and constraints of the general plans of cultural action of these European Capitals of Culture and highlight sustainable projects and interventions in recent years. The analysis of these four candidacies for the European Capital of Culture follows a methodological approach: the national scale of analysis (strategies and public policies planned in the cultural field) and the document analysis technique of official plans and projects for action (the candidacies).

For the first time, an analysis of the official documentary sources of the four cases has been undertaken (Aveiro e Braga, cities in the north of Portugal; Évora, city in the south of Portugal; and Ponta Delgada, city in the Azores archipelago). The following transverse dimensions have been identified:

Social – Cultural participation in live arts and culture | Cultural production and heritage management:

- Bottom-up cultural proposals: starting from the grassroots, with processes co-constructed by local populations, through to relationships with Europe. Proposals include cultural and artistic creation projects and material, and digital platforms for relating to artefacts and memories.

- Cultural proposals reflect, with greater or lesser centrality, two concerns: managing and protecting cultural heritage and strengthening diverse, inclusive, creative and cutting-edge cultural offers.

- Relationship of each city's proposals with local cultures, material and immaterial heritage, and the recovery of memory, identity, and community sense.

Economic - Cultural production and heritage management:

- Projection of circular and transversal development logics of territories, with different actors involved (local, national and international), with bottom-up logics and practices.

- Broad and transversal conception of culture: community, inter-knowledge, diversity and memory.

- Economic and symbolic value of culture: recovery of traditional economies related to local cultures and transposed into cultural projects.

Policy – Cultural administration:

- Participation of municipal administration in the candidacy process and design of cultural and artistic objectives and programmes: the growing political interest in the long-term impacts of economic and political investment in the culture and arts sector is highlighted.

- Medium-sized cities with historicity and memories and levels of cultural and artistic development that reflect national and municipal investments in the last 25 years in Portugal in the culture and arts sector.

- Simultaneous concern with the development processes of territories: investment in culture and education, strengthening cultural democracy and national and international (European) projection of territories and populations.

- Candidacies reflect the specificity of contemporary and cyclical economic, environmental and social contexts: they raise the challenge of articulating the disruptive dimension of European and global contemporaneity with the lasting space-time of cultural experiences including the:

- post-Covid-19/pandemic era and the effects on public mobility and participation, as well as national and international tourism practices
- war in Ukraine and the redefinition of political and social tensions in Europe
- migratory movements, financial crisis and quality of life in Europe
- climate change and economic, social, and cultural sustainability practices.

There are possible tensions in the relationship between cultural participation in live arts and culture, and cultural production and heritage management, depending on the specificity of cities and territories: coast/inland, continental/insularity, ancestral and traditional activities, material and immaterial heritage, and the greater or lesser extent of the cultural and creative sector in each city and territory. However, the proposals examined reflect local specificities: the desertification of territories and the aging of the population (Alentejo and Évora), the peripheral dimension of regions (Évora and Ponta Delgada), and the long-term resilience of territories and populations. In this sense, the candidacies remain concerned with the long-term impacts of cultural development policies and the sustainability of investments to be made in the local and regional cultural and artistic sector.