

Martin Heller



The Most Interesting City in Austria

Linz is a European Capital of Culture in 2009. Linz, of all places: the city that most people simply passed by for a long time while driving on generously dimensioned highways, seeing nothing objectionable in that fact. For Linz apparently had little to offer apart from industrial smog, a dubious historical reputation and the rather dry pastries named for the city. Also because the home of culture—after all, Linz as European Capital of Culture is a representative of the Republic of Austria—is apparently elsewhere. In Vienna, of course, and in Salzburg, perhaps also in Graz. All the places, that is, where the bourgeois elites had and still have good taste, which they cultivate and exhibit. For the “steel city kids” of Linz, such culture was unattainable. In the city of labour and industry, all they were left with was their stubborn pride in being different. With the aim that one day, they would make the best of it, with united forces, for their own future. In Linz’s year as European Capital of Culture, that future has become tangible. Linz as a cultural capital has only little in common these days with the preconceptions that are still held by many. Its change has been fundamental. Yet: how many people are aware of this? The outdated images of the past must therefore be replaced by images that speak of the present. And that present requires an interpretation that explains what really happened.

Success stories made in Linz

In this venture, two aspects have proven particularly remarkable. First of all, Linz has become an economically prosperous business location which knows its way around global competition in line with its own standards. The forward-looking pragmatism peculiar to the city has helped it tap many markets. Second, Linz has also caught up enormously in terms of culture, making massive investments in the quality of life of its inhabitants and laying the groundwork for raising awareness of culture. Such a status quo is, of course, no accident, but the product of developments that can be traced down with precision. The difficult, but wholly successful economic, technological and also political rehabilitation of heavy industry was one of these developments, as was the success story of Ars Electronica, which began in 1979 with the creation of a globally connected, unique competence centre working in several fields of the then-new media sector in and for Linz. The constellation could hardly have been any more forward-looking—both as regards the revitalization of outdated industrial conditions and the pioneering achievement of conquering virtual realities and territories for the long term. During these past decades, Linz has achieved an exemplary revival. Eventually, it called for diversification—in the business world much faster than in the world of culture. Accordingly, the economic area of Linz today accommodates not only the classical corporations working in steel processing and the chemical industry, but also flaunts a wide variety of business sectors, ensuring great dynamism. Culture, on the other hand, has remained locked in a profile developed in the 1980s and 1990s which must now be critically reviewed.

Renewing the New

That precisely is the cultural capital project for Linz 2009. In contrast to the now famous example of Glasgow which, in 1990, marked the first time in the history of the cultural

capital format that the European spotlight was not a classical city of culture, the point is by no means to make an industrial city competitive in the cultural world in the first place. Instead, Linz aims to initiate a new phase of cultural practice at a high level and to supply, to the extent possible, high-quality examples as well as the cultural policy groundwork and tools to this end. At the same time, the combination of local and international resources is accorded particular significance. All of this sounds far more abstract than it actually is. First and foremost, the city's year as capital of culture is a large festival which requires gracious hosts, competent authors in nearly all sectors and disciplines, masters of ceremony, but also an audience that supplies curiosity and an open mind, especially towards all things unfamiliar. This, in turn, requires a programme that relies on indigenous, existing strengths, yet subtly tries to elicit productivity from spaces as yet unused.

In the case of Linz, it seems self-evident to exploit the freedom of being located between Vienna and Salzburg, and therefore not having to offer many things that are part of the standard programmes of these two cities. On the other hand, Linz can and should develop and show what only this city can afford to do: for the simple reason that, beyond the burden of tradition and the requirements of prestige, it is free to experiment with cultural heritage and market constraints. All this in an effort to establish something in the way of a contemporary model of cultural self-thematization and European learning.

Relations between Culture and Business

In the process, Linz's living reality is decisive. In the inevitable race for competitiveness, the business climate and the social climate, as well as a sort of overall mentality, ultimately carry far more weight than aesthetic arguments, cityscape or contributions to a vanity exhibition of international architecture. For this reason, it will be decisive in the years to come, for instance, how Linz lives up to the challenge of the creative industries, which have recently come to be considered test cases of successful urban companies in Europe. Efforts must be made to embed these innovative fields of business in the city in such a way that they have a positive effect on the labour market. In other words: they must offer graduates of the Linz University of Art opportunities to remain in the city, instead of moving to larger metropolitan areas, and to work in the increasingly interesting field at the intersection of culture and business.

In fact, the relations between culture and business as a whole should be reconsidered with a view to identifying mutual interests and opportunities, but also incompatibilities. After all, what holds true for all of Europe also applies to Linz: in times of stagnant or dwindling public funds for culture, while expectations on the part of that same public are rising, new partnerships must be sought and found. These will have to go beyond conventional sponsorship models—after all, we have clearly seen what can be called the economization of culture, just as well as the culturalization of the economy. That is to say: past opposition has long transformed into a form of reciprocity that should be used for its benefits to society.

But how is all this to be achieved? And what role can Linz09 realistically play in the process?

During the preparations for Linz's year as capital of culture, it has already become apparent that such a large-scale project entails entirely new dimensions of expectation and judgment, and that it offers considerable room for criticism. Conflicts emerge and must be engaged in with no guarantee of coming to a satisfactory solution. While working on the programme, Linz09 has at the same time been charged with addressing all conceivable points of fracture, fault

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lines or even simply patterns along which new things can emerge. All this without overtaxing the project and those involved in culture, politics and economics, and always with the aim of producing sustainability.

Linz 2009 is Linz 2015

Sustainability is one of those concepts that have most often been invoked in the popular perception, but also in the planning of probably all current capital of culture projects, from Norway to Hungary and from Estonia to Austria. What is being invested in culture is to be worthwhile or even pay off in the medium and long term. However, opinions are definitely divided when it comes to defining what that means. While some would draw a balance of all buildings and infrastructure developments carried out in the course or in the wake of a turn as capital of culture, others would define the benefits as the sum total of all those processes and movements that generate learning effects for the entire social fabric. Such effects, after all, are never just isolated, but in the ideal case, they define a determined, practicable planning horizon.

In the case of Linz09, that horizon marks a more or less incidental time frame. Linz 2009 is Linz 2015: the claim situates sustainability effects within a reviewable framework. Six years after the cultural capital commotion, Linz is to reap returns that document sustainability. Returns that mean an increase in opportunities can be ascertained. An awakening from satisfaction into the next dimension of urban quality which poses a true challenge for Linz. Just like in 1985, when the mayor at the time announced that Linz would become the cleanest industrial city in Austria—and Linz was to prove its achievement of that claim barely ten years later. What determination for the future could be as courageous and inaccessibly tangible today?

The Challenge

My attempt to answer that: Linz will be the most interesting city in Austria in 2015. That may sound utopian to many, yet it is also imaginable within the logic of contemporary reality. For Linz is already an interesting city today. A city with a brisk pace, a city that enables, an unconcernedly solution-oriented city, a social model city, a rural city, a wealthy city, a globally open-minded city. And a city where culture, industry and nature can enter into a symbiosis like hardly anywhere else.

Such an objective requires the joining of all forces. Muscle alone is not enough – what is needed is the sort of gaming intelligence that confidently controls the urban game without wanting to win at all costs. For it is clear that a multitude of players must be involved, far beyond politics and its field of action, as must all their objectives. This means that strategies of urban development must be found that face up to the complexity and contradictions of urban life, yet are intent on staying on course. On course for the horizon of an intense, vivid and exciting city that redefines its own style while remaining true to itself. A city that can raise its own profile. As an alternative option, for instance, for all those who find Vienna too confusing, too tiring and too historical, and who are more comfortable in Linz's particular (and successful) dynamism within an idyllic environment. Culture plays a key role in such a vision—as an indicator both of the will-

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ingness and capacity of self-reflection, but also as a concrete claim to benefiting from the options offered by a post-modern civil society of a Central European bent—for the population of the former steel city and its projects, but also for the urban fabric itself that is home to these people and the base camp of the sort of progress that has always marked the history of European cities.

