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European Capitals of Culture Are Rethinking “Legacy”

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A new report for the Interreg Europe project ECoC Echo finds that cities holding the title increasingly see legacy as the long-term capacity of a cultural ecosystem to collaborate and adapt, rather than a set of buildings or programmes that outlast the title year.

Legacy has long been one of the European Capital of Culture's central promises and one of its least settled ideas. A new report from the ECoC Echo partnership argues that cities are now answering the question differently: they are asking less "what survived?" and more "what became stronger?"

The report draws on reflections from the partnership, international focus groups and a survey of past, present and future titleholders. Focus group participants came from Aarhus 2017 to Leuven 2030, and an April 2026 study visit to Leeuwarden-Fryslân informed the work. The survey covered cities from Amsterdam 1987 and Graz 2003 to later & future capitals, including Liepāja, Évora, Bourges, České Budějovice, Skopje, Nikšić and Leuven, plus Aalborg, a candidate for 2032.

The authors note that there is still no shared understanding of what successful legacy looks like. Participants described it as "never a given, never final", needing constant renewal rather than a fixed end point.

The analysis rests on five legacy pillars the partnership agreed at its kick-off seminar in Veszprém in October 2025: institutional, infrastructure, programme, financial and emotional legacy. The report stresses that the pillars reinforce one another. Strong partnerships make long-term investment easier to secure, for instance, and community trust shapes participation.

From this, the authors draw six considerations for future capitals:

-Start legacy planning before the title year

-Put people before projects

-Co-design for shared stewardship

-Make dialogue a permanent practice

-Rebalance access, influence and cultural leadership

-Measure what matters

Several examples stand out. Leeuwarden 2018 set up an independent foundation before securing the title and later defended its autonomy against attempts to fold its legacy into municipal structures.

Veszprém 2023 identified future operators for each infrastructure project at the planning stage, which the report says kept all eighteen venues running without significant extra funding after the title year.

In Bodø 2024, where major capital projects were limited, the programme treated relationships as infrastructure under the slogan “capacity = connections”.

Chemnitz 2025 is moving from delivery towards coordination, fundraising and capacity building, with plans for a dedicated “legacy company”. It also warned that legacy bodies risk competing with the sector for funds unless they can show they are growing the overall pot. Among future capitals, České Budějovice flagged the challenge of having no dedicated public funding beyond 2028.

On governance, the report found little evidence that any one model, whether independent foundation, association, municipal structure or hybrid, consistently outperformed the others. Adaptability, shared ownership and trust mattered more. Independence was a recurring priority, though Aarhus 2017 showed that embedding legacy in an already mature ecosystem can avoid duplication.

The findings also bear on evaluation. Participants rarely led with visitor numbers or economic growth. They pointed to stronger

governance, partnerships, participation and institutional learning. The authors argue that conventional indicators capture only part of the picture. They link the shift to Kate Raworth's regenerative economics and Jason Hickel's work on prosperity beyond growth, and to the OECD and ICOM's 2019 argument about culture's public value.

The report ends by proposing "regenerative legacy", which it describes as an ongoing capacity for renewal. It suggests practitioners ask who benefited, who participated, who took responsibility and who will carry the work forward.

ID of the report: Planning for impact through European Capital of Culture was written by Dr Tom Fleming and Daianne Moreno-Mempin of the consultancy TFCC Europe. ECoC Echo is co-funded by the European Union through Interreg Europe. The partnership runs from Leeuwarden-Fryslân 2018 to Bourges 2028, with regional partners in Estonia, Hungary, France and Portugal.

M.T.