

Local political change, the neo-creative city paradigm and the mutations of Valencian cultural branding

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ABSTRACT

The 21st Century has seen the emergence and subsequent crisis of the Creative City paradigm in which the broad scope of culture and heritage for urban branding has been shown. Valencia's case has been paradigmatic in showing the potential and negative effects of this strategy, which entered into crisis and constituted one of the critical elements of the strategy of the Conservative local government (1991–2015). With the change of government to a left coalition in 2015, the transformation of a policy based on 'white elephants' shifted to one based on the production of International Events and centres to boost the city's strengths within the international framework. Although great events and infrastructures were ditched for a more participatory, sustainable approach, international bodies such as UNESCO consider the city still adopts a 'Creative City' strategy. In the neo-Creative City paradigm, the development strategy focuses on creating value from the bottom up, drawing on the material heritage and the creative fabric to this end. The strategy remains focused on promoting the city as an international brand, on the self-promotion of the local government as a tool of legitimacy, and top-down governance.

1. Introduction

Culture has been one of the great vectors of urban development from the end of the 20th Century to the beginning of the 21st Century, (Evans, 2001; Scott, 2010). In the first stage during the 1980s and 1990s, culture was used as an instrument for city renewal based on the development of infrastructures and facilities (Bianchini, 1993; Mommaas, 2004) but later there was a shift towards the promotion of the urban brand in a more symbolic sense (Evans, 2003; Rius-Ulldemolins, 2014). In this context, cultural policy has gained centrality within the urban agenda as one of the levers for transforming the image of declining cities into that of creative cities (Pike, 2011; Vanolo, 2008).

Thus, the centrality of cultural policy at the local level has been interpreted as a way to promote cultural and creative industries, attract new workers and visitors to the city, and generate cultural products that are symbolically associated with the urban brand and its unique features (Currid & Williams, 2010; Ren & Blichfeldt, 2011). Likewise, cultural tourism has become one of the key resources for large cities, which is why a large slice of their budgets are spent on creating large infrastructures, leisure and cultural events to attract them (Rius-Ulldemolins & Gisbert, 2019). With this, local governments and local elites

have sought to boost media impact and an attractive discourse for their urban brand at a global level (Boix et al., 2017; García, 2004).

However, this strategy has shown limitations in attracting tourism. This can be ascribed to many other global cities adopting the same approach, thus reducing the novelty and marginal utility of such 'investments' (for example, new, iconic buildings by top architects) (Muñoz, 2010; Rius-Ulldemolins, Flor Moreno, and Hernández 2019). Therefore, the Creative City strategy has begun to show signs of running out of steam given its medium-term unsustainability since it calls for large investments and does not report the expected impacts (Majoor, 2011). The negative effects at the urban level have also been increasingly highlighted, namely: (1) the gentrification/'touristification' of city centres (Degen, 2008, Fernández González 2014); (2) a service sector that is highly dependent on tourism, and that drives out other economic sectors, making the city vulnerable to crises when there is a downturn in international tourism (Hughes, 2018; Mansilla & Milano, 2019, pp. 1–22). Then again, another criticism has been the absence of bottom-up social participation and the need to include participation in cultural governance processes with mechanisms for concretion and decision in order to democratize cultural policy that are usually controlled by political and artistic elites (Jancovich & Franco, 2013, Jancovich &

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Bianchini 2013).

Furthermore, the social and political importance of the cultural sector has grown, with greater attention being paid to it in political agendas, attracting more funding. This new centrality has been accompanied by waning autonomy in the management of cultural projects given that these are increasingly being harnessed for other social and economic goals (Gray, 2008; Kleppe, 2018). Thus, the discourse on the Creative City has been used to justify the growing weight given to large branding-oriented cultural projects. This in turn has led to managers exercising greater control over projects and over the artists themselves, sparking discontent among creative sectors (especially emerging or alternative ones that have seen their projects marginalized) (Sánchez Belando 2017; Pradel-Miquel, 2017). Here there is a growing belief that cultural policy needs a thorough overhaul, not least because the Creative City paradigm has fallen into disrepute following the Global Financial Crisis in 2008 (d'Ovidio & Cossu, 2017; Comunian, 2011). One alternative advocated is that of a cultural policy focusing on social integration (Belfiore, 2022; Connolly, 2013). Thus, we have been able to observe the emergence of an alternative branding model that, in response to criticism for its instrumentalizing excesses, has incorporated the promotion of local culture and sustainability into the Creative City Model (Kagan & Hahn, 2011; Ratiu, 2013).

The analysis in this paper is based on three main strands and sources:

First, research findings on the City of Valencia's Culture Plan. The research study was drawn up on behalf of the Valencia City Council and is based on twelve of the city's cultural agents and experts (anonymised).

Second, we held several interviews covering two case studies: (i) the City Music Project, a cultural branding project through this creative label started in 2017 until its stoppage in 2019; (ii) The celebration of the nomination of Valencia World Design City in 2022, the origin and development of the candidacy and its impact on the city. And finally, a participant observation in the Valencia Urban Forum sessions, a meeting held in May 2022 on sustainability in which culture received limited but representative attention and which consisted of two debates attended and the interventions recorded. Moreover, five specific interviews have been developed (two on City Music (with its manager and an expert music critic), two on World Design City, with its manager and an expert creative city, member of the initial candidacy and, finally, a person in charge of organizing culture of the Valencia Urban Forum. These interviews have been carried out within the framework of the Project "New Urban Cultural Policy and Social Transformation", a project funded by Spain's Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities - National R&D Plan (REFERENCE: RTI 2018-096299-B-I00). The interviews were transcribed, coded and analysed and incorporated into the paper's content but omitting verbatim citations given that the interviews were conducted under an anonymisation agreement. The study was based on quantitative analysis of budgets, public administration and agencies reports and Twitter TL analysis of case studies involving Valencian local and regional public representatives.

First, we will analyse the growing importance of local cultural policies — especially the development of branding projects linking creation, products and urban lifestyle in promoting the city's brand abroad. Next, we shall examine the relationship between local politics and the Creative City paradigm from the end of the 1990s to the present. This span allows comparison of the approaches taken by the previous PP government (Conservative Right) and those of the present government (a Left-Wing coalition) and the extent to which the latter differ from or continue the earlier entrepreneurial urban strategy. Third, we will examine three city projects within the Creative City paradigm: (1) The unfinished City of Music project; (2) The successful Design City project; (3) Urban Forum València 2030. All three initiatives have been pursued since 2015, and are part of the idea of a Creative City in its broadest

cultural sense (including design). They form part of the present Valencian government's¹ urban branding goals, which combine a Creative City paradigm with a sustainable, participatory approach. This paper thus examines to what extent the new local government has managed to alter the urban development project based on major events. The present approach is a mutation of the previous model within the sustainability framework but remains part of the Creative City paradigm.

2. Local cultural policies, political change, and the crisis of the creative city paradigm

In 2015, after seven years of crisis and five of austerity policies, the Spanish State's development model based on large infrastructures and a construction boom had come to the end of the road. Spanish society witnessed the collapse of public spending and a spate of huge corruption scandals with growing wrath (Romero & et al., 2018; Antentas, 2017). This was also the case in Valencia but things were made much worse by decades of deindustrialisation and impoverishment — processes masked by growing tourism and the political discourse of putting Valencia on the map through large events and infrastructures (Boix et al., 2017; Rius-Ulldemolins & Díaz-Solano, 2022).

Thus, the 2015 local elections have been described as a turning point in the local governance paradigm with the irruption of local governments in the main cities such as Madrid, Barcelona and Valencia led by parties that emerged from the 15-M movement (López García & Guillermo, 2020; Roig, 2020) as part of the change in cultural policies towards a radical rethink of its paradigm (Zamorano and Mariano, 2018; Rius-Ulldemolins & Klein, 2020, pp. 1–25). Unlike other political currents, the social movements stemming from 15-M in Spain and the new political parties that emerged from them have given central roles to both cultural and symbolic aspects, and a broad range of cultural intermediaries (Podemos Cultura, 2015; Rubio-Arostegui & Rius-Ulldemolins, 2022). This vision facilitates cultural objects and symbols, as well as symbolic and identity aspects in a populist political strategy (Levi 2012; Barrio, 2020). In keeping with this approach, cultural policy is seen as a key tool in the struggle for hegemony. This notion has steeped the analysis of cultural policy as an ideological tool, enshrining a vision that ideas and discourses are what mark the evolution of cultural policies (Barbieri 2012, 2018). In this sense, the new currents inherited or influenced by 15-M such as *Podemos* (or in the Valencian case *Valencia en Comú* and *Compromís*) have developed a critique of the previous cultural policy (Àlvar et al., 2020, Rius-Ulldemolins & Joaquim, 2020), nevertheless they will have the challenge of transforming a cultural policy based on major events and cultural and sports infrastructures (Rius-Ulldemolins, Flor Moreno, and Hernández 2019) and redefine cultural policy according to a more sustainable perspective (Kagan & Hahn, 2011; Ratiu, 2013, d'Ovidio and Moratò, 2017).

Therefore, this article aims to point out that after the emergence of the Creative City Paradigm there has been a growing delegitimization of it due to its failure to fulfill promises of economic and social development and, due to growing criticism from of the alter-globalist social movements, or outraged and also by the creators who are excluded from the development of these initiatives and harmed by the instrumentalization (d'Ovidio & Cossu, 2017; Martí-Costa and i Miquel, 2012).

As we propose in Table 1, we can find three phases in the development of the creative city in Spain: a) A first stage in which it first arrives at the end of the nineties in the big cities first and in the nineties in a general way the then dominant paradigm in cultural politics (Pratt, 2008; Redaelli, 2020), on which regional and local governments have based much of their entrepreneurial strategies for planning their

¹ Often referred to as 'La Nau' government given that the political accords enabling the government's formation were reached in the emblematic 'La Nau' building, formerly the headquarters of the University of Valencia.

Table 1
From creative city paradigm to neo-creative city paradigm in Spain.

	Creative City Paradigm		Neo-Creative City Paradigm
	Instrumental	Participative Turn	
Discourse Rationales	Cultural and Sport as levellers of economic and social development	Criticism to excesses and pitfalls of CCP. Attempt to link culture and sustainability	Search of new foundation of cultural policy, continuity of city entrepreneurial orientation
Realizations	Global big cultural and sport events and Flagship Infrastructures	Regional events or cultural capital including local participation	Middle-size events and candidatures oriented to local participation and sustainability
Examples	City of the Arts and Sciences (València)	Urban Forum of Cultures (Barcelona)	City of Design (València)

Source: own elaboration.

development and competitive strategies at State and international level (Patricio Mulero and Rius-Ulldemolins 2017; Prytherch & Boira Maiques, 2015). In Spain’s case, this paradigm was first embraced by progressive democratic forces and later on by the Conservative Right. Despite nuances in approach, the paradigm commanded support across the political spectrum (Rubio, Arturo, & Rius-Ulldemolins, 2018).

In a second stage, there is a consolidation of the international networks that promote a new wave of the paradigm of the creative city, among which we can highlight two axes: a) Based on the European candidacies of culture, in which Various Spanish cities participate and that at a European level generates growing criticism for its instrumentalization in the logic of the creative city as branding (Jones & Wilks-Heeg, 2004). This generates growing pressure to democratize its management and encourage local participation (Cohen, 2013; Žilić-Fišer & Erjavec, 2015). b) Another axis of this second stage of the Creative City is its logic of UNESCO creative city networks, in which the candidacies try to increasingly integrate the local element while pursuing an objective of cultural branding at an international level (Patricio Mulero and Rius-Ulldemolins 2017; Rosi, 2014). In the initiatives developed in a second, more creative conception of the creative city, the limited conception of citizen participation has been criticized as a validation of what is proposed top-down and the need to propose scenarios of participation and social innovation in which the citizens have a real power of decision and self-management (Sánchez Belando 2017; Bonet & Négrier, 2018).

In a third stage, the criticism of the Creative City Paradigm for its elitist management grows, its instrumentalization of culture, social divisiveness and gentrification. In this case, there is a growing demand to abandon the paradigm of the Creative City for a cultural paradigm of sustainability and cultural rights (Kagan & Hahn, 2011; Ratiu, 2013, d’Ovidio and Morató, 2017). However, the Creative City Paradigm actually has not been ditched and is often hidden under the rhetoric of sustainability and cultural participation but that continues to direct cultural policy more towards branding than towards cultural rights, as is the case in some large cities in Spain after the 2008 crisis and the unsuccessful of policies for large events and cultural infrastructures (Zamorano & Mariano, 2018; Barbieri, 2018, Rius-Ulldemolins et al., 2016). That is why we can say that the Creative City framework still holds despite the criticisms levelled at it. This explains why there has been no return to the old national framework of disseminating consecrated cultural assets — an approach that typified advanced modernity and the development of the Fordist economy and the post-war Welfare State (Dubois, 2016; Mangset et al., 2018).

Moreover, cultural policy has gained relevance in recent decades in relation to its importance as an economic sector and its key role in local regeneration strategies and urban branding. It has also played a key role in attracting tourism, which has put cultural para-diplomacy high on the

political agenda (Zamorano, Martín, & Rodríguez Morató, 2015; Zamorano & Mariano, 2017). This has had beneficial effects by drawing greater attention to the public agenda, and at the same time putting actions in the political and media spotlight (Mangset, 2018; O’Brien, 2015). These trends have led political parties to make culture part of their electoral pitches. The parties also draw on the subject to furnish symbolic resources for their discourses, and to offer patronage (Rius-Ulldemolins, Flor Moreno, and Hernández 2019; Rubio-Arostegui & Rius-Ulldemolins, 2022) (Rius-Ulldemolins, Flor Moreno, and Hernández 2017; Rius-Ulldemolins and Joaquim, 2020). Thus, festivals, major events and thematic years have become great occasions to mobilise support from broad professional and business cultural sectors (including creative sectors) and thus gain media visibility and bolster electoral candidates (Gligorjevic, 2014; Rosi, 2014). In this respect, the proliferation of Creative City brand candidacies is interpreted as a way of (a) being on the media agenda, and generating contact networks in preparing and developing candidacies, and (b) giving culture greater weight in the local agenda and for readying the government team for the future share-out of power and duties (important, given the internal competition found in the local coalition governments).

However, in the 2010s in Europe and especially in Spain, resistance to the implementation of the Creative City paradigm grew in the form of cultural industry neighbourhoods (d’Ovidio and Morató, 2017). Hence, consideration began to be given to the long-term consequences of the Creative City model and the need to rethink it in sustainability terms (Sánchez Belando 2017; Ratiu, 2013, Patricio Mulero and Rius-Ulldemolins 2017). That is why there is a debate on which of the following approaches now applies: (a) a post-creative model (ditching the previous paradigm); (b) the Entrepreneurial City; (c) discursive change that exhibits some continuities with the Creative City model. Here, we shall analyse Valencia’s case given that it epitomises a city that has chosen to base much of its development on cultural branding (Boix et al., 2017; Rius-Ulldemolins & Gisbert, 2019).

3. Valencian creative city strategy: changes and continuities

Valencia is a middle city (the third in population of Spain, after Madrid and Barcelona) but with a strong cultural identity, inherited from a rich medieval history and with own language, Valencian, a singular and rich literary tradition and a vibrant, many-faceted culture (musical, design, gastronomic and landscape) (Boira Maiques 2003; Ariño Villarroya 1992). This cultural singularity has been valued in Spain as a tourist attraction, although it is less well known abroad (Prytherch and Boira Maiques 2015). Thus, the cultural element began to be seen as a strategic tool for promoting the region and city, and positioning Valencia against other cities such as Barcelona (Boira Maiques 1988; Boira Maiques 2007) and for taking an entrepreneurial turn (Prytherch & Maiques, 2015). In this sense, its condition as a medium-sized city incapable of competing with Madrid and Barcelona and the growing concentration of creative industries means that its commitment to place “Valencia on the map” through the creative city must be based on an active entrepreneurial strategy linked to the international scene and its networks of events and cultural capitals (Rius-Ulldemolins & Gisbert, 2019).

During the Franco dictatorship (1939–1978), the Regime controlled all forms of culture and traditional festivals to strengthen its control over a formerly progressive, autonomous society (Flor, 2011, Hernández Martí 2022). With the advent of democracy in the 1980s, cultural policy began as a vector of European modernisation, opening up and rebuilding a Mediterranean-style regional identity (Hernández i Martí et al. 2014). However, this period ended abruptly with the victory first at the local level and then at the regional level of the Spanish Conservative and Nationalist Right, which quickly saw culture both as a way to regain control over Valencian society and to project the city as a tourist destination. To these ends, it used a globalizing discourse that effectively marginalized the unique elements of Valencian culture

(Rius-Ulldemolins & Díaz-Solano, 2022). The most prominent case is that of The City of Sciences and Arts. Under the guise of Mediterranean architecture by a Valencian architect, Santiago Calatrava, the mammoth project copied the apparently successful formula used at The Guggenheim in Bilbao. The buildings were designed by a world-renowned architect (Frank Gehry) to draw tourists but the project lacked any medium or long-term planning (Moix, 2016). This model utterly failed in financial terms in 2010, visits plummeted, and large deficits were racked up. The upshot was that Valencia gained notoriety as a decadent, wasteful city (Rius-Ulldemolins & Gisbert, 2019, Romero & et al., 2018).

At this time, the hegemony over cultural policy aimed at the local public — especially the *Fallas* (Rius-Ulldemolins et al., 2021) and the policy of major events — collapsed. This gave rise to an intense opposition campaign by Left-Wing parties — especially *Compromís* (Left, Ecological, *valencianist* party) — against the kind of cultural policy pursued by the Popular Party (PP). The Left-Wing critics characterised the PP's approach as an empty, globalizing failure (Coalició *Compromís*, 2015). The defeat of the PP at both the regional and local level and the legal charges brought against all its local representatives in 2015 seemed to mark both the collapse of the management model, and a clean slate for drawing up a new cultural policy in Valencia that would serve citizens instead of just catering to its elites. The programmes of parties such as *Compromís* (valencianist party):

“After over twenty years of Rita Barberá, marked by the waste of public resources, by privatisation and the hijacking of citizen initiative, the starting point must be to map of cultural facilities (...) with citizen participation and open dialogue letting the men and women who live in our city to decide what use they think is the best use for cultural buildings and for their districts (...).” In addition, it set a clear objective in line with cultural democracy: “*Compromís* will especially commit to the decentralization of the cultural offer, to revitalize life in the districts” (Coalició *Compromís*, 2015).

Therefore, *València en Comú* (citizen candidacy based on *Primavera Valenciana* (Valencian Spring), the Valencian branch of 15-M movement with the participation of *Podemos*) bet on:

“a comprehensive redefinition of cultural policies, based on forging a new relationship between citizenship and culture. In general, we must move from an idea of ‘access to culture’ as offering scope for cultural consumption to a conception of ‘access to culture’ as empowerment for the creation and cultural participation of citizens” (València en Comú 2015).

Moreover, the Creative City model used in Valencia (called ‘The Calatrava Model’) was seen as gravely damaging the city’s cultural and social image: “Perhaps more serious, the huge funding needed for holding these ‘great events’ has starved alternative cultural projects of money, subsidies, and support” (*idem*). Thus, *València en Comú* pointed out the need to reframe cultural policy priorities by re-examining the roles played by the cultural sector and citizens. This new party also went into a little more detail on what it meant by proposing a Local Network of Creativity Centres, as a meeting place for Do-It-Yourself creators, social movements and people. Those spaces were aimed to “Concentrate training in and production and exhibition of cultural goods in the heart of each district, where local residents are the creators” (*idem*).

The 2019 local elections struck a new balance of local forces (with the disappearance of *València en Comú* and the loss of all seats by its political heir, *Podemos València*) and confirmed the continuity of the left-wing coalition between the Socialist Party and *Compromís* (Martín Cubas et al., 2020). In relation to the partners of the government, the minority, the Socialist Party, claims a shift in cultural policy towards big events: “We always add because we don’t want to leave anyone on the side-lines. Because the great cultural projects cannot continue to be great only for a few.” (PSPV 2019). This refers to the cultural policy followed until 2015 by the Popular Party. Certainly, it vindicates culture as “ (...) a space for innovation and internationalization” (*idem*) in an

approach that gives the Creative City paradigm an inclusive nuance. However, in the planned actions, no action referring to a major event were developed in the programme but rather actions to promote cultural supply and dissemination (national scenic centre, design museum, music subsidies, etc.).

As for *Compromís*, its election manifesto continued to be anchored to the classic paradigms of cultural democratization for “Promoting participation in the cultural field that guarantees a direct and continuous dialogue with the various cultural sectors and with citizens themselves” and “Clear commitment to the decentralisation of culture, taking into account the basic principle of fostering citizens’ access to the enjoyment and consumption of cultural activity under equal conditions” (*Compromís* 2019), focusing three of its specific objectives on the libraries, two in facilities and three in medium-sized sectoral festivals. However, none of its objectives bore on creativity or on applications for international labels or networks, which will contrast with later developments, as we will see below.

Once in charge of the Local Government, the *Compromís* Coalition government and the PSPV seemed to have almost completely abandoned the promotion of local culture within an urban branding approach. One should note that in the Strategic Framework of the City of Valencia (a plan approved in 2021), culture appears together with knowledge and design as vectors of economic development (Strategic Objective, OE34), and in the objective of “consolidating Valencia as key city in The Mediterranean, and at the European and international levels in culture, creative leisure, design and innovation. While it is true the plan’s Goal SO40 is to stimulate the local cultural sector (albeit without any reference to access or cultural rights) but no specific measures are mentioned. The focus on the city’s international positioning in the cultural/knowledge/design fields is justified because “they constitute essential poles of its [Valencia’s] economic activity and key values for the attraction of international visitors and the communication of the city brand such as the music sector, design” (...) (*idem*, page 29). Significantly, the rest of the culture goals are aimed at promoting tourism (SO42, SO43 and SO44). All in all, this constitutes the framework in which the main creativity projects are planned from 2015 to 2023 and cover the Valencia City Music and the World Design Capital projects, as we shall analyse below.

4. Neo-creative city and urban branding: the Valencia City Music and the World Design Capital as a new City of Events paradigm?

València Music City (VMO): cultural policy at the service of the branding of the local cultural industry.

The idea of creating a candidacy for the City of Music arose within the City of Valencia Cultural Plan (*Ajuntament de València*, 2017), developed within the framework of the new Left-Wing coalition government and under the impetus of the Department of Cultural Resources, controlled by *Compromís*. In this plan, four strategic lines were developed, among which the proposal to present a candidacy for UNESCO Creative Cities stood out. The proposal sought to promote cultural participation from Brass Bands (which enjoy a strong presence in the city), its renowned music schools, the music scene with traditional Valencian roots, and community music performance in general.

A Special Commissioner was hired to recruit a team to draw up the candidacy of *Palau de la Música*, which would act as the managing and promoting entity. However, the opposition of the *Acció Cultural* Council, which had music competitions controlled at the time by *València en Comú - Podemos*, was both hostile to the promotion of cultural industries and in political competition with *Compromís*, stalled the candidacy for two years. During this time, the presentation and granting of the UNESCO seal of City of Music to Llíria — a town in the Valencia region (UNESCO 2019) — blocked Valencia City’s international candidacy. This was because if successful, Valencia’s candidacy would have yielded two cities from the same region in the network.

However, shortly before the new municipal elections in the Spring of 2019, the idea was revived to publicly present another format and strategy, this time aimed precisely at promoting cultural branding. The Councillor for Cultural Resources and the City Mayor, Joan Ribó presented a document titled “Strategy for the development and positioning of Valencia as a City of Music Musical (hereinafter VCOM)” to the media ([Ajuntament de València, 2019](#)). In reality, this strategy was based only on a report prepared by the Department of Applied Economics and whose content is not public. Its content focused solely on the idea of convening the professional music sector in a large gathering under the City of Music aegis (*Diari La Veu*, 2020). In the press conference, this measure was announced as having already been agreed and in 2020 it was stated that a commissioner would be appointed to direct the new Valencia City Music Office. Two events paralysed the measure’s implementation. One was the COVID-19 pandemic, which brought musical activity to a standstill. The other was the physical deterioration of the *Palau de la Música* (forcing its use as an auditorium to be suspended) and the entity’s worsening finances. Even though both problems have been overcome, the project has yet to recover from these setbacks even though the councillor was re-appointed in 2019 until 2023. The City Council has given no reasons for putting the project on ice until further notice ([Camacho, 2021](#)).

Overall, we can highlight some features of the City of Music project and how it differs from the initial UNESCO candidacy project. For convenience’s sake, we have grouped these comparisons under three heads:

- (A) The first project’s main goal was to foster participation and cultural rights along the lines proposed by [UNESCO \(2017\)](#). By contrast, the VCOM project’s goal sought to foster Valencia’s international image.
- (B) In the first project, the participation of the amateur sector of the city’s brass bands, traditional music, and grassroots schools was announced as a community-based initiative. By contrast, the VCOM’s goal was to satisfy the demands of the professional music sector such as licenses to play live music in bars, aid to concert halls, and expansion of street performance spaces ([Garsan, 2022](#)).

Finally, in the first case, development was proposed of a multilevel, cross-cutting governance candidacy involving all public administrations and music sectors. By contrast, the VCOM proposed hiring private consultants to direct cultural branding such as Sound Diplomacy, without social participation and placing special emphasis on the revitalisation of the music industry sector, festivals and live music ([Devís & Álvaro, 2020](#)) — an approach commonly found in other Music Cities ([Darchen et al., 2022](#), pp. 1–15). In short, in this case we can see how a project based on the notion of cultural rights set out in the incoming government’s initial proposal came to nothing as it turned into yet another scheme to put Valencia on the map — in other words, more instrumentalization of culture as a branding tool.

4.1. World Design Capital: changes and continuities in the branding of the creative city

The World Design Capital award came about over sixty years ago. The purpose of the award was to foster the design profession over the course of a year. Every two years, a new city gets the award, for example, Turin in 2008, Seoul in 2010, and Valencia in 2022. Its main goals are to: (a) get companies and organizations to take design into account; (b) create opportunities for stakeholders; (c) show new methodologies applied to design; (d) highlight design innovations; (e) boost the tourist attractiveness of cities. Finally, in the case of Valencia, the Creative City paradigm was given greater stress, with great reliance on design as a key element for social transformation: “[World Design Capital Valencia 2022, 2020b](#); [World Design Capital Valencia, 2022](#) seeks to convert design as a tool for imagining innovative solutions to great urban challenges”

([World Design Capital Valencia 2022, 2020b](#); [World Design Capital Valencia, 2022](#)).

The project arose mainly thanks to the efforts made by the *Associació València Capital del Disseny* (Valencian Association Design Capital), which promoted the [World Design Capital Valencia, 2022](#) candidacy. This is why most of those involved are designers and, to a lesser extent, people linked to the business world, with the idea of contributing to better management and dissemination of creation in the design field. The association is funded through the Valencia City Council, the Generalitat Valenciana [Valencian Government] and the Valencian Institute of Business Competitiveness, with the promotion of the Visit València, La Marina de València and Feria València identities, and with the support of design professionals and companies in the sector. However, most of the funding comes from public sources, both from the local government (€2.2 million) and the regional government (€2.25 million) and — to a much lesser extent — from private entities making a small contribution (€0.2 million euros) ([World Design Capital Valencia, 2022 2020b](#)).

The WDC emerges in a favourable context with opportunities at various levels, (1) At the State level: a Non-Law Proposal launched by the Spanish Parliament that seeks to develop a national design strategy; (2) At the regional level it is understood that a change in production model is needed and why it was decided to promote the ‘Orange Economy’ through the Ministry of Finance and Economy’s Model, which is also reflected in the various strategic plans prepared by the Ministry of Culture: *Fes Cultura* (Generalitat Valenciana, 2016) and *Cultura per a la recuperació* (culture for recovery, a cultural post-COVID-19 plan) ([Marrades et al., 2021](#)). The creation of the Valencian Agency for Innovation and the Employment Service (SERVEF), the General Directorate of Internationalization of the Ministry of Sustainable Economy, Productive Sectors, Trade and Work, and Valencian Archive project are also noteworthy initiatives in the design field; (3) At the local level, the presentation of the candidacy also coincides with projects such as *Las Naves* or the Valencia Marine Consortium, which participate in redesigning coastal Valencia through design-thinking; and (4) From the outset, the project had the support of other bodies and institutions outside the City Council such as Feria València, Valencia Provincial Council, design training centres, the Congress Palace, and Valencian Tourism Foundation (see [Fig. 1](#)).

Despite this multilevel governance, the project has been conducted at the local and regional levels, which politically and financially underwrite the project. The PSPV has long been in favour of designating Valencia as the seat of the World Design Capital. This was expressed by the Deputy Mayor of Valencia City Council Sandra Gómez, the President of the Valencian Regional Government, Ximo Puig, and the former Minister Pedro Duque and Minister Diana Morant as public representatives of the Government’s Ministry of Science and Innovation. This support can be seen both in the press and on social media ([Contreras, 2022](#); [Garsan, 2022](#)), where the Vice Mayor advocates a Valencia that is the cradle of an emerging, diversified culture and a leader in creativity. She also shows her support for the members of the WDC in Valencia (Xavi Calvo and Marisa Guillén) to make these things happen (see [Fig. 2](#)). Furthermore, the *Generalitat*’s (regional government) President Ximo Puig called for “inclusive, social design” with Valencia as its world capital ([La Vanguardia, 2020](#)) (see [Fig. 3](#)).

The Mayor’s Office of the Valencia City Council, led by *Compromís*, has also favoured the project, which has been publicly supported by public officials belonging to the Party. The current Mayor of Valencia, Joan Ribó, reaffirmed the municipal government’s commitment to the candidacy. Once Valencia had been chosen as The Capital of Design, he highlighted how Valencia was preparing to host the various WDC activities (including the National Innovation and Design Awards) in the city. Regarding the representatives of *Compromís* in the *Corts Valencianes* (Valencian Parliament), it should be noted that they are also committed to the WDC. Mónica Oltra, the Vice President of the Valencian Regional Government in 2019, ‘tweeted’ her support, welcoming the designation



Fig. 1. The discourse on “Truly” Putting Valencia on the map.

Note: From right to left, from top to bottom, 1) Compromís Valencia (Consol Castillo and Jordi Peris): “put Valencia on the welfare map, 2) Pere Fuset (Councilman for Innovation: “World Design Capital (...) a good motivation to put the City on the map and gain self-esteem”.

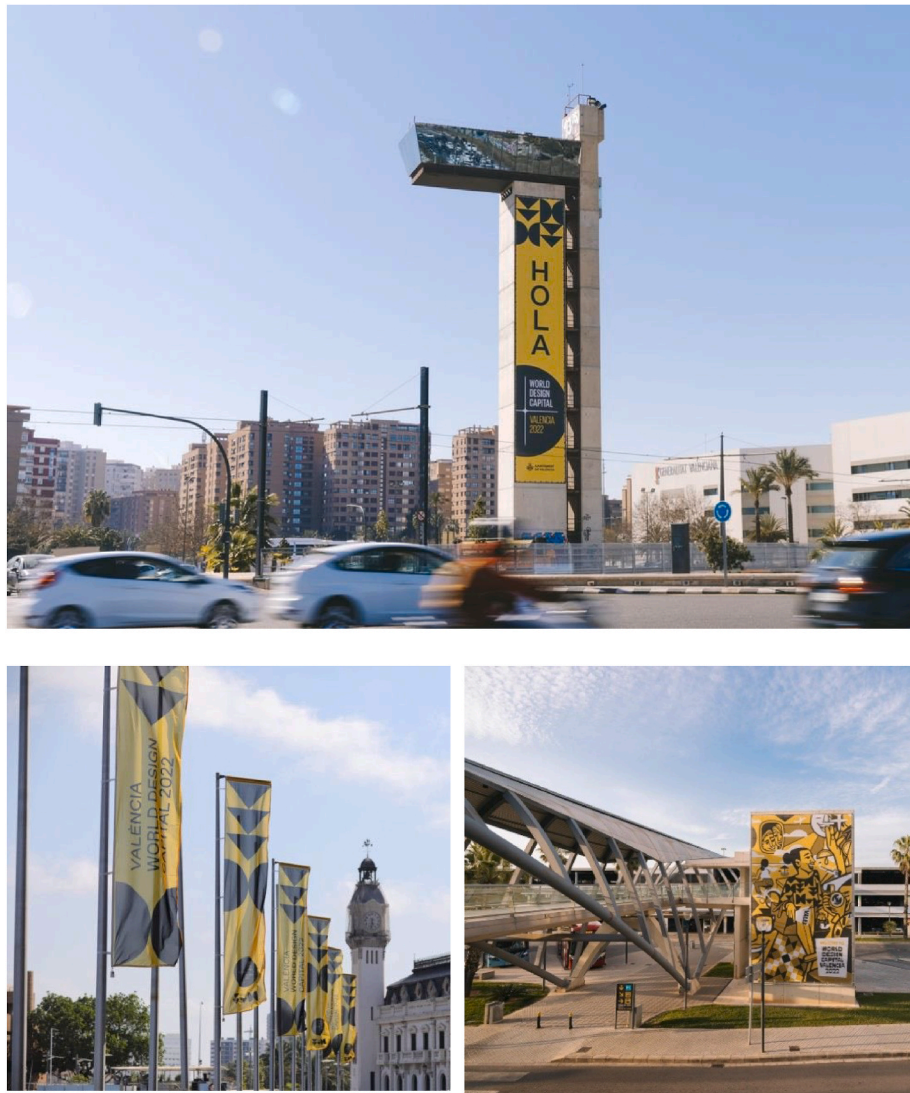


Fig. 2. Valencia city of design as urban brand (2022).

Source: the authors.



Fig. 3. Political support for the City of Design 2022

Sources: Image 1. Tweet by Sandra Gómez, Deputy Mayor of Valencia about the realization of the WDC. Source: Twitter (@SanGomezLopez). Image 2. The Mayor of Valencia Joan Ribó at the National Innovation and Design Awards. Source: Twitter (@joanribo). March 21, 2022.

of Valencia as Design Capital and contrasting this with the previous PP government’s mostly unsuccessful to put the city on the map and finally the damage to the city’s reputation due to the corruption scandals in the City of Arts and Sciences, the Valencian Institute of Modern Arts or Formula 1 circuit during this period (see Fig. 2) (Rius-Ulldemolins, Flor Moreno, and Hernández 2019; Aimeur, 2015; Nieto, 2015). Moreover, the project has been developed in cooperation with the local creative community — in stark contrast with the PP’s approach in an earlier stab at urban branding. The WDC plan was to create a permanent Local Design Council, a project that would comprise two stages: (1) Drafting a report analysing the relationship between design and the city; (2) The creation of the city’s Design Council, the first in Spain (WDC Valencia 2022, 2022).

However, if the means to put Valencia on the map differ (i.e. by taking a more professional, locally-rooted approach), the end goal is still to promote urban branding. Likewise, the language used on creativity’s scope for spurring local development continues to recall the PP government’s cultural policy. Here, one should note that the previous government focused on major cultural events and cultural instrumentalization serving Spanish national branding. The present government seeks “an impact that is capable of promoting the Spain brand internationally” (World Design Capital Valencia, 2022 2020a7). In other words, the language has changed somewhat but the underlying goals of entrepreneurial regionalism on ‘Calatrava Model’ lines remain unchanged.

4.2. Urban Forum Valencia 2030: participatory process or urban branding campaign?

One of the promoters of this strategy encouraged by the Mayor’s Office is Jordi Peris, a professor at the Polytechnic University of Valencia, a specialist in cooperation and social participation (Boni et al., 2014). The former leader of *Podemos* from 2015 to 2019 joined the *Compromís* candidacy in 2019 and, although he was not elected to the Council, he was given the position of Special Commissioner in the new government. His new post as General Coordinator of Urban Strategy and Sustainable Agenda sums up this new entrepreneurial, creative strategy under the aegis of the new government’s sustainability paradigm. His main mission has been to organise a 2030 Urban Forum Conference to address metropolitan, climate, urban and mobility challenges.

Although the proposal is presented as participatory, the truth is that

the Forum is actually a set of 17 round tables chaired by City Councillors, with experts from other administrations and sectoral business agents and entities taking part (Valencia City Council 2022b). In addition, although some round tables were proposed as a response to urban problems, in general they cover local institutional architecture and do not enshrine the cross-cutting cooperation needed to solve complex urban issues. For example, it is significant that the Forum has one round table for the Creative City and another for Cultural Management. Each is presided over by a Councillor, reflecting two cultural areas, one in the hands of the Socialists and the other of *Compromís*, even though both fields should be part of the same seamless approach.

On the Conference, a report was presented on the city’s progress towards Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) within Valencia’s urban strategy and the 2030 Agenda (València City Council 2022a). Although the forum is supposedly participation-friendly, attendance requires electronic registration (which admittedly is free) but with limited places available. Furthermore, there is no plan for fostering participation, drawing up of proposals, or voting by attendees. Although citizens may formally submit proposals and the City Council says it will consider them, there is no commitment on its part to carry them out or even respond to them in a reasoned manner. Thus, in the report of the meetings held on May 25, 2025 about the creative city published on the web (see Fig. 4), the local government has limited itself to announcing that the prioritized strategy has been “innovation, culture and sustainable tourism” (Ajuntament de València, 2023). Thus, the action and project chosen (without informing in which election process this conclusion has been reached) is “Create a cultural agenda for citizens, provide communication facilities by the institutions to strengthen the cultural fabric and the initiatives for the development of cultural entrepreneurship projects” (Ajuntament de València, 2023). In other words, both the strategic line and the actions and projects are so generic and indefinite that, ultimately, it does not imply any commitment for the local government in the development of a more sustainable cultural policy and, on the contrary, they recover the pro-entrepreneurial language of the city. creative. This amounts to a very limited conception on social participation, as show in their government plan resulting of: the City Social Council del Plan Valencia Urban Strategy. It is made up of individuals selected by the local government and has only a Council function and not an executive one (Ajuntament de València, 2022b). Overall, although the Urban Forum of Barcelona is presented as a space



Fig. 4. Results of the participation process of Urban Forum Valencia 2030 (2022). Source: Ajuntament de València (2023).

for participation, but it has represented more of a space for the promotion of the local government strategy and its strategies towards a neo-creative city.

5. Conclusions

In the last decade we observed changes and continuities in the creative paradigm, partly motivated by the growing evidence of its undesirable effects and the exhaustion of medium-term projects (d'Ovidio & Cossu, 2017; Comunian, 2011), which leave in its wake large underused infrastructures, debts and even international image problems (Rius-Ulldemolins & Gisbert, 2019). That is why in both the academic world and in UNESCO, there is a shift taking place in the Creative City concept, with a need being seen for more sustainable cultural policies but without abandoning the entrepreneurial approach for fostering local development (Throsby, 2017; UNESCO, 2017).

This is heralded as a shift from elitist schemes based on large investments and detached from the creative professional fabric, to programmes fostering public value goals and involving hundreds of agents, as found in the Literary Cities (Maria Patricio-Mulero et al., 2017) and Music Cities (Darchen et al., 2022, pp. 1–15) initiatives. This approach to the Creative City sponsored by UNESCO (Rosi, 2014) has driven this change, in which creativity, participation and sustainability are common slogans, revealing a political change in both substance and form. However, there is no rupture but rather continuity in the form of a mutation of the Creative City paradigm (Pratt, 2008; Redaelli, 2020), as we have seen in the case of Valencia.

On the one hand, València Music City was presented as an urban branding opportunity focused on the live music sector, and was very well received by the main professionals in the sector. Beyond the big announcements and the expectations created by the Council, the project was not particularly ambitious. In essence, it created a 'one-stop shop'

for the sector that would speed up procedures to facilitate the programming of live music in the city. Yet to the surprise of many social agents involved, the project has been suspended indefinitely. We verified, that this project has effectively abandoned goals of cultural democratization of the City Council's policies and now focuses on the creative paradigm, with rhetoric on citizen participation and sustainability being tacked on as an afterthought. However, these plans never came to fruition, so the Council's cultural policies were limited to continuing with the inertia of earlier programming while seeking to decentralize culture and democratizing its access. Yet all the while, there was no plan that would have given such cultural policies greater depth.

By contrast, the World Design Capital (WDC) arose from a desire to capitalize on an outstanding sector of the Valencian creative fabric, starting from a historical heritage of local design based on the furniture industry, ceramics, design graphic, and projecting it jointly under a local brand. In addition, it is linked to international networks, as well as discourses on inclusion, participation and sustainability (World Design Capital Valencia, 2022 2020a) promoted by UNESCO (2017). Thus the World Design Capital seems to be an alternative model to the great globalized events divorced from local needs, such as Formula 1 urban racing circuit laid out in the city in the previous decade (Rius-Ulldemolins & Gisbert, 2019) — an approach that has sparked growing opposition to its inefficiency, marginalization of creators, and its naked political instrumentalization of culture to serve industry and branding goals (d'Ovidio & Cossu, 2017; Patricio Mulero and Rius-Ulldemolins 2017). In stark contrast to this approach, the WDC seeks to draw on local elements such as the city's strength in both design and designers, the commitment of public institutions, and a host of private associations. However, the WDC's evaluation states that: (i) the tourist impact and urban image are stressed just as much as in the past 'City of Events' model; (ii) that professional designers have only noticed a slight improvement in the influence they wield (Garsan, 2022).

To sum up, the new Creative City paradigm ends up following an instrumental approach to cultural policy, focused on city branding, albeit with a more inclusive perspective and oriented towards sustainable urban development (Duxbury et al., 2017; Ratiu, 2013) in plans for Valencia 2030 (drawn up in 2022). These plans link cultural and creative policy to the 2030 Agenda and SDGs for the coming decades (Ajuntament de València, 2022a). However, despite all these changes, we observe that local governments still see culture as a top-down tool for fostering economic development. At the same time, we are seeing the watering down of cultural democratizing policies, which are being supplanted by city branding strategies whose purpose is once again to promote the city abroad. In short, the paradigm of the Creative City has changed but remains firmly anchored to an elitist approach whose goal is to boost the city's image at home and abroad.

Author contribution statement

Joaquim Rius and Pau Díaz: Writing (Original Draft): Preparation, creation and/or presentation of the published work, specifically writing the initial draft.

Joaquim Rius and Pau Díaz: Writing (Review & Editing): Preparation, creation and/or presentation of the published work by those from the original research group, specifically critical review.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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