

Image of the Future

Instead of a preface:
a conversation



The participants in this roundtable interview were as diverse as the range of themes of the Graz Year of Culture 2020. The two members of the Programme Advisory Board *Monika Pessler* and *Bettina Steindl*, Head of Department *Michael A. Grossmann*, Programme Manager *Christian Mayer*, along with *Siegfried Nagl* and *Günter Riegler* as policy-makers in this sphere answered questions by *Peter Grabensberger*.

Given an extremely broad concept of culture, the sustainability goals set for the Graz Year of Culture 2020 were highly ambitious both with regard to the cultural landscape and urban society. Ms Steindl, as an expert looking at this from the outside, who could be better placed to judge whether people beyond Graz were aware of this survey “of urban civilisation and urban culture” that was elaborated by the Programme Advisory Board and how it was perceived. An often overused concept, is sustainability even to be expected and how can it be achieved? How do you think it can be measured? Do art and culture have to be measurable at all?

Bettina Steindl As I see it, the Graz Year of Culture is very well known outside of the region and it is even considered a model. People are aware of the event in political circles and also with regard to artistic aspects, i.e. the programming. I could imagine the Graz Year of Culture being emulated elsewhere, which I would very much welcome.

As far as sustainability goes, I am very much in favour of it being measurable. Coming from economics, I know that it is possible to assess culture with the aid of metrics (among other things). But above all, I am convinced that culture takes effect through what we call “soft factors”. The way we discuss about and engage with our own city is and remains a long-term process. The perception of the space we live and work in and the possibilities that we have to shape this space have a long-term and galvanising effect. In my view, Graz has succeeded in garnering attention outside of the region beyond the end of the Year of Culture. Personally, I see a number of projects that I would like to bring to Vorarlberg.

I am convinced that we are very consistent in Graz when it comes to art, and that art probes the fault lines of society with particular rigour.

Günter Riegler

A radar screen with lots of different answers

Mr Nagl, you were the first person to start thinking out loud in the media about a Year of Culture in summer 2017. Taking off from the city’s year as Capital of Culture in 2003, you even envisaged a Year of Culture that could supply ideas that would later be incorporated into urban planning. In this conception, art and culture act as catalysts that allow us to examine current problems and that yield new ideas to help us solve them. Do you think that has been accomplished? Aren’t these lofty goals asking too much of the culture scene in Graz, asking them to take on what are really the core tasks of local politics?

Siegfried Nagl As a kind of “little brother” of Helmut Strobl, the city’s legendary cultural affairs officer, I was there when we received the good news of being the only European city to be named Cultural Capital of Europe for 2003. For five years, we were really looking forward to it and we put a lot of effort into bringing this project to fruition. The project changed Graz and gave the city fresh momentum, even if some people had a sense of disenchantment after it was over. Then, in summer 2017, I called the city councillor for cultural affairs Günter Riegler, who was on holiday at the time, and spoke with him about how, looking back to 2003, we now lacked something that might perhaps be manifested in the form of a Year of Culture.



Günter Riegler

Fortunately, all of the political groups in the local council approved this project. The happy coincidence that the cultural affairs officer was also financial affairs officer made things easier.

With seventeen years having passed, the aim was to allow culture producers to create a kind of commission. So this time around it was not the culture producers and artists who came to us for funding for their work. Instead, we ordered a very special image of the future. Of course, we are extremely proud that even the Venice Biennale chose the same title as us.

We all wanted to get everyone involved and to ask them how they saw life in the decades to come. This gives us a certain point of reference, a kind of radar screen with lots of different answers – there cannot be just one answer – just as there are many different people. I don’t think that this was asking too much of art and culture at all. Everyone joined in with great joy and commitment, I didn’t have the impression that they were being asked too much. On the contrary: my impression was that they enjoyed exploring the future in a project of their own. Particularly in these times, with all the crises we are having to face, it is important to join forces with creative professionals to show that there most definitely is an image of the future.



Siegfried Nagl

Ms Pessler: like Bettina Steindl, in the many discussions held by the Programme Advisory Board you spoke out in favour of the very broad concept of culture that must underlie the selected projects. Given your personal relationship with the city of Graz, one might almost be tempted to quote Peter Handke when he speaks of the innerworld of the outerworld of the innerworld. What is the special quality of culture in Graz? When you began dealing in depth with art and culture in Graz in the first stage of your career, a lot of things were viewed as provocation by people outside of the city. Is it necessary for culture to get people worked up? Was theming the Year of Culture around everyday culture intended as a provocation?

Or is no provocation needed to address issues of social relevance with the means of art?

Monika Pessler In Graz we can look back on a strong cultural identity and artistic tradition, with examples including Forum Stadtpark, steirischer herbst, trigon or Camera Austria to prove it. Back then, art provoked people, and it still does, when – as in this project – artists are invited to manifest themselves in public space and appropriate various spheres of life. As we know, the mission of the Graz Year of Culture was to examine the status of society, the urgent problems involved, and to stake out a frame of reference.

I also think that there can be provocation in failure, particularly in a Year of Culture that was taking place in the midst of a global pandemic. And given these circumstances, a lot of people did some incredible things with their events. Maybe there wasn't always as much media coverage or footfall as we would have liked to see. So provocation is certainly not just what divides society, it is also about drawing people's attention to difficulties and tasks that lie ahead.

Mr Riegler, as City Senate councillor for the arts, culture and science, among your other tasks, a compliment is due to you, first and foremost and on behalf of all decision-making bodies, for the fact that Graz did not just focus blindly on the pandemic, but rather went through with the Year of Culture project "in spite of" the situation. Did this stubbornness pay off? Looking back now on this extraordinary time, one which the whole world has been facing, did the special organisational structure prove a success? In the early stages, when you were trying to make sure that all of the projects were carried out that the Programme Advisory Board had selected as having particular merit, should you perhaps have been even more insistent? I am referring specifically to an idea for a project that came from Forum Stadtpark that would have focused on the strain that motorised private transport puts on a conurbation but which was not carried out. Didn't this preclude an important part of urban public space as a theme for art right from the beginning?

Günter Riegler I am convinced that we are very consistent in Graz when it comes to art, and that art probes the fault lines of society with particular rigour. People in Graz often view art as a social sculpture that is still taken to grapple with the major contemporary issues that continue to occupy people and influence the way they think; two broad examples I would mention are projects opposing fascism and projects promoting feminism that have been negotiated again and again for many years now.

Particularly in these times, with all the crises we are having to face, it is important to join forces with creative professionals to show that there most definitely is an image of the future.

Siegfried Nagl



Christian Mayer

That is why it made sense to base the Year of Culture on a very broad concept of culture that is deliberately not geared to holding a biennial event, for example, but rather to dealing specifically with these key topics. As far as stubbornness goes: Graz demonstrated very clearly the great intensity with which 600 entries scrutinise the issues of our time.

The project you mentioned that didn't take place is actually a special example of how these big issues might be materialised. In what was a kind of laboratory situation in Graz, the initial question was whether it would be possible to do without a car for a week. I am convinced that the project entry alone encouraged people to reflect on this question and I really hope that we will be able to try it out one day.

What did happen was that the population began thinking about the advantage of cars and what they are good for.

With regard to the organisational structure, I can say that there would have been no point in setting up a festival with a dedicated, expensive limited company, for example. We confined ourselves to offering what we are good at: cultural policy-making in the sense of enabling and utilising the existing organisation of the Department of Cultural Affairs. People in the art scene really appreciated the fact that we managed with this minimal, lean structure.

A vibrant network of arts and science

You became a programme manager for the Year of Culture at a relatively late stage. How did you feel about organising a festival with these high aspirations at such short notice? Was the selection process based on best practice? In terms of operations, how do you see the organisational structure that we have spoken about? Will more advanced structures be needed to ensure the sustainability that was called for?

Christian Mayer Even before corona, it didn't go without saying for a local government, a local council committee to say not only are we going to approve a substantial special additional budget for the arts and culture – it will also be for a specific theme and focus on urban planning. Yes, the time allotted was tight, but hard work and a passion for putting things into practice in a strong team made it all possible. It was very wise to set up an independent Programme Advisory Board consisting of people who work across various disciplines and who also have ties with Graz, but who do not come directly from the Graz scene. Our call was a kind of mission statement that set out some fundamental parameters, for example that we did not want to limit the projects with regard to subjects:

asking people what they had to say about the future did not tie things down to a particular genre, instead it spoke to the entire cultural landscape and interested scientists. Given the wealth and also the relevance of the entries, this approach was more than successful. The call set out a valuable framework for concentrating synergy effects and greatly increasing the visibility of the expertise found in the local arts and science landscape. We could try to evolve the structure of something like this further in the future. The selection process in the Programme Advisory Board itself was an intense one. Cultural institutions were also allowed to apply but in the end projects that failed to address the specifications of the call to the desired extent were not chosen. What we created and continue to create here and now was and is a strong knowledge base for the future of society.

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Christian Mayer

Given the statements so far, we can see that the arts and culture scene in Graz is more extensively networked than before in some areas. Above all, various links were made to the world of science. Is that what has really happened and is it tangible? Do you see a way of developing these links further still? How can the Culture Department of Austria's second-largest city support this development?

Michael Grossmann We would never have expected to see the scale of the networking that has taken place. These links were particularly strong between the arts and culture and science. Sometimes it is the big projects that fail to produce the desired outcome. In this case it was the relatively simple, real-world question of "how we want to live", and the response and the participation it led to were more than surprising. It revealed the importance attached to the basic idea of this Year of Culture project, with people in the arts and in science trying to find out, for example, what changes people bring about in the landscape and what traces they leave behind. These unique contributions to sustainability are owed to a transdisciplinarity of the arts, culture and science that allowed us to develop better answers.

To respond to your second question:

the Culture Department will most certainly continue to promote this transdisciplinary approach and urge cultural policy-makers to continue to see this as a priority. Among other things, the Culture Department is considering setting up a dedicated advisory committee to evaluate projects that are expressly transdisciplinary, working across the spheres of art, culture and science, and using this expertise to elaborate a basis for decision making.

The call set out a valuable framework for concentrating synergy effects and greatly increasing the visibility of the expertise found in the local arts and science landscape.

Christian Mayer

Graz as an experimental laboratory

The "Magazin des guten Lebens" (Magazine of Good Life) and the "Grazer Leitfaden für inklusive Kultur" (Graz Guide for Inclusive Culture) stand for an inclusive approach to culture. Aspects covered include accessibility, both with regard to environments and building design, so as to enable equal participation for people with a disability, but also – in another project – Graz as a city of a diverse future that, as stated in a project delivered by the ISOP association, will enable people "to be different without fear". The Climate-Culture-Pavilion, in turn, addressed a totally different topic, one that is equally of international relevance. How can a city influence the way people think about these things? What can we take away with regard to the future of the city, which is a relatively small unit in the global scheme of things? Will it be possible to continue to harness public spaces for this purpose after a project has finished?

Siegfried Nagl To begin with, I mentioned a commission, a commission without any expectations. Our idea for the commission was not that of a Capital of Culture year, that was all about garnering international attention and delivering a brilliant performance. Instead, it was about asking the many people in our city the honest question of how they wanted to live. Of course, it was to be expected that they would address the big issues that are currently being discussed around the world, above all in connection with urban spaces.

As far as inclusion and people with disabilities are concerned, for example, we have a large number of people in Graz who have in fact been joining forces and dealing with this question for decades.

Graz has an Advisory Board for People with Disabilities that does outstanding work. Every month, people with disabilities come together to voice their pressing concerns. One example is the idea of turning the Reininghaus area into an inclusive district. There are just so many things going on in the city that we can build on.

I have often said that Graz – with people from 155 nations, with all their talents, troubled pasts, points of view and religions – could be an experimental laboratory for the world. In Graz we are having to deal with the same problems, but sometimes they are perhaps a little bit smaller than in other urban spaces. And with almost 300,000 residents, perhaps Graz can even show the world how people can live together peacefully despite all of the differences I mentioned. How can we show the world a vision of how things might go ahead positively? Maybe Graz can become known for the fact that the city is home to a wide range of different people who succeed in looking forward despite all their problems. Let us prove that it works, not only as a motivation for the city itself but also with the aim of making people want to get to know more about Graz. It's not about superlatives. The key to the future lies in education, training, further training, research – I am thinking here of universities, for example – and creativity driven by the arts and culture. These are all the most important companions for a positive future.

Ms Pessler, you know a lot about artistic developments in Graz, you have always talked in Graz about an art that interferes. What do you see as the preconditions for ensuring that art can fulfil this task in future too and thus for further evolving the Year of Culture? Will it be possible to get people from different genres of art and fields of science to continue to develop joint projects? Whose role is it to motivate them?

Monika Pessler It was and is incredibly important for the scene to engage in a dialogue that is so especially open, to enable this dialogue to take place. At any rate, motivation is when artists and scientists feel that they are noticed. I just think that cultural policy in Graz, as in other cities, is still in a learning process. We haven't reached the optimum yet anyway. Hopefully, other policy makers will increase their support for cultural policy makers in their endeavours to optimise the situation in this regard. There is still a lot to be done here as well.

One outcome of what was a special, wonderful Year of Culture project is a little book published by Keiper about the little white, grey and green scaled forest crocodile in Graz-Gösting.

Hopefully, other policy makers will increase their support for cultural policy makers in their endeavours to optimise the situation in this regard.

Monika Pessler

In various projects, the Year of Culture appropriated public space and turned it into artistic urban space – not just in the historic city centre with its major cultural institutions but also, very deliberately, as far as the outlying areas of Graz. In the end, all seventeen districts were involved. Additionally, the critical public eye was on the transformation of the river Mur area and the development of urban structures on the Reininghausgründe site. Institutionalised as an advisory committee to the city's councillor for cultural affairs, the Culture Advisory Board even envisaged the river Mur area as potentially becoming a "Denkraum Mur", a "Mur thought-space". Mr Riegler, do you think that this decentralised commitment paid off or does a city – in concert with other culture-driven cities – have to realise that they are only noticed by people outside of the city thanks to their "cultural juggernauts" and thus a centralised cultural landscape?

Günter Riegler Ultimately, the Year of Culture was and is advertised just as much as a project of urban development and urban planning. It was therefore crucially important to involve all seventeen districts so as to enable a kind of introspective look at these seventeen district centres. Times were when there was a lot of criticism about how the only art and culture in Graz was in the east of the city, on the left bank of the Mur. The University of Applied Sciences in Graz-Eggenberg and the Kunsthaus on the right bank of the Mur helped to lessen this perceived inequality.

It was precisely this idea that came to play a role once again in the Year of Culture – not to create something festival-like, not just cultural juggernauts. For example, if the subject is increasing the density of use of urban space, the problems connected with densification can be explored from a positive and negative angle. Especially in peripheral districts, densification can also easily be perceived as confinement, despite best efforts to ensure that resources are used carefully. This was one factor alongside various other sets of questions. Going back to the previous speaker, I also think that it is undisputed that cultural policy makers are responsible for further motivation.



Monika Pessler

The issues that concern society

Ms Steindl, as a member of the Programme Advisory Board who is firmly based in the west of Austria, both creatively and professionally, it would have been difficult to be on site for all of the projects in Graz even without the pandemic. Were you satisfied with the extent to which you were able to be a part of the programme? Generally speaking, did this open up any new channels for you? In “Normal x 4” – another Year of Culture publication – Beate Engelhorn, director of the Haus der Architektur, quotes United Nations forecasts according to which seventy per cent of the population will be living in cities by 2050, thus making it necessary to rethink urban neighbourhoods, among other things. That is what the Year of Culture programme was all about, that you were involved in selecting as a member of the Programme Advisory Board. Is there anything that you can take away from the Graz Year of Culture to use in other projects that you are in charge of, for example “Dornbirn plus”?

Bettina Steindl Of course, I would have liked to get to see the projects in person that we chose very deliberately as the Programme Advisory Board. Due to the pandemic, I had to inform myself online to keep up to date. As I see it, the experience from Graz can also be applied to other cities and to Vorarlberg. I am a strong advocate of looking beyond the borders of the city and the province and of learning from one another.

Encouraging the arts and culture scene to develop strategies for political and social action may still lead to discussion in these parts, but in other European countries it has long been standard practice. So I think that the approach of focusing the Year of Culture on this question in Graz is a crucial one. From various vantage points and fields, the aim is always to home in on the issues that concern society, how society evolves and how we can provide the necessary infrastructure for the road ahead.

Michael Grossmann Cooperation on the Year of Culture was excellent especially with the Provincial Government of Styria. The fact that the Culture Department of the city of Graz was also able to handle provincial funding proved to be particularly efficient. These were funds made available to Graz at the initiative of Governor Hermann Schützenhöfer and Provincial Councillor for Cultural Affairs Christopher Drexler. This helped avoid a situation, for example, where an advance operational assessment of a particular project by the Provincial Cultural Advisory Board might have assessed the project’s quality differently to the city’s Programme Advisory Board.

The next step might be a cooperation with other cities in order to strengthen networks. This would allow us to work on overarching topics across different cities.

Bettina Steindl



Bettina Steindl

As for the collaboration with the local departments who were involved in the official procedures in the run-up, it was a real joy; in fact, I would say that focusing the Year of Culture on fundamental questions of cultural development and urban development helped deepen and intensify this cooperation even further. The simple question of “how we want to live” thus also became the question of “how we want to cooperate with each other”. As in the procedures for the projects in public space, it was very gratifying for me personally to see the relevance of art and culture being acknowledged in the other departments too.

Mr Mayer, in one of your summer newsletters there was a nice comparison of the Year of Culture programme, like the European football championship, hitting peak form again in summer 2021. Of all the cultural enterprises in Graz, as we know the programme above all featured the Stadtmuseum Graz GmbH, the Kunsthaus and the three companies of the Theaterholding Graz/Steiermark GmbH: the opera house, the Schauspielhaus and Next Liberty. Despite this visible participation, I would nevertheless like to refer to the preliminary report that had been drawn up on the development of a “Graz Year of Culture 2020”, that mentions the aim of overcoming cultural segregation: could more be done in this regard?

Paths ahead

Christian Mayer Of course, there are lessons to be learned from everything we experienced and devised in the Year of Culture, all of the conclusions that we formulated. Some things would certainly need to be structured differently next time. Let's remember how little time there was for preparations and the tightly planned schedule – deadlines that are just too tight to fit into the programming of some institutions. The fact remains that, next time, a project of this nature would definitely benefit from having more big institutions take part. There are many different ways to strengthen a cultural landscape – something which we often discussed. One step in this direction would be to eliminate the divide between the big cultural institutions and the free scene. We are in a rather special situation in Graz in that most culture producers have strong biographical roots in the city. Directors come and go, that is all part of the way they see their professional development. It certainly makes sense to strengthen ties in this respect, also with regard to content, above all if we maintain that art and culture have a unifying force.

A Year of Culture 2030 – is that a goal worth striving for? As a revival? Will we still be seeing similar main themes? How could or should the city present itself by then?

Michael Grossmann Personally, I feel that a Year of Culture 2030 would already be the second iteration. I would like to see the Year of Culture taking place every five years, so the next one would be in 2025. Similarly to the 2020/2021 project, there would be a very clear call with the aim of intensifying reflection on certain subject areas. Alongside “normal” cultural activities, this would allow us to experience the intensity of cooperation that we saw in the last project every five years. Despite all the difficulties of organising the Year of Culture in these times of global crisis, the importance of focusing on a question of current interest became all the more apparent. One of the aspects that will be relevant in 2030 will no doubt be how we want to work – on the basis of developments in the world of work by then. However, in 2025 and 2030 – as in 2020/21 – we will probably have to look at how we intend to develop further.

Christian Mayer The urgency of these issues, that will continue to play a part in the way we live and work together, will be the same in 2030.



Michael Grossmann

At the moment, the best format for a structural analysis of these questions has yet to be decided. I can well imagine both approaches: small formats and structures, in order to ensure continuity, or big projects that would need to be reviewed to make sure that they are still timely and relevant.

Monika Pessler The question allows us to acknowledge and thank Christian Mayer and the very small team that was also involved. It was an incredible feat. What was and is very important is the experimental nature of the Year of Culture project. It will be essential to continue to harness the potential that the project tapped into, whether it is every five years with highlights or something else.

A particularly important aim is to strengthen and further improve the conditions in which art and culture are produced. We will be able to build on a lot of what was already possible, the Trigon idea, for example.

Bettina Steindl Yes to repeats! Initiatives need the opportunity to be repeated in order to improve and respond once again to questions of current relevance. The next step might be a cooperation with other cities. On the whole, Austria is small enough to deepen networks and collaborate with other cities. This would allow us to work on overarching topics across different cities.

Günter Riegler It would not only be desirable to set fixed timeframes, whether it is biennial, triennial or whatever, but rather, very specifically, to hold an annual “Seminar of the Future”, for example under the umbrella brand of the Year of Culture. The questions that were discussed haven’t been settled, they are still just as pressing and relevant. Ideally, we would have an annual special budget for “Calls” that would also include other cities – not as a repetition, but as an ongoing prospecting operation. And this could all take place around the idea of “Culture is happening all the time” – “Future is happening all the time”.

Siegfried Nagl Picking up on the “pandemic” that was just mentioned, that will hopefully come to an end one day, it would definitely be nice to have a permanent “ART-demic” in Graz. The question is whether we need this kind of focal point every time, as was the case with the Year of Culture, or whether – as has been successfully demonstrated – it is possible to carry out continuous urban development together with the city’s creative professionals. How could we install what this process gave rise to on a permanent basis? If we gave rise to something for Styria, for Austria with the Year of Culture project 2020/2021, that has a lasting positive effect, also in the spirit of sustainability that we have spoken about.

These unique contributions to sustainability are owed to a transdisciplinarity of the arts, culture and science that allowed us to develop better answers.

Michael Grossman