

ON  
THE  
MOVE

Cultural Mobility Flows Report

# Cities as Enablers of International Cultural Mobility



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**On the Move** is the international information network dedicated to artistic and cultural mobility, gathering 93 members from 33 countries. Since 2002, On the Move has been working to provide regular, up-to-date and free information on mobility opportunities, conditions and funding, and to advocate for the value of cross-border cultural mobility. Co-funded by the European Union and the French Ministry of Culture, On the Move is implementing an ambitious multiannual programme to build the capacities of local, regional, national, European and international stakeholders for the sustainable development of our cultural ecosystems.

On the Move regularly commissions researchers to investigate different themes closely related to the network's activities and the work carried out by its members. Reflecting on transversal concerns and key areas of artistic and cultural mobility, the network tries to establish a clearer picture of current movements and trends while formulating policy recommendations.

<http://on-the-move.org>

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# Foreword

We are delighted to present this *Cultural Mobility Flows Report*, which examines the central role of cities in supporting the international circulation of artists, cultural professionals and their work, and reflects on the wider impacts of international cultural relations and cooperation on artistic development, local ecosystems and global cultural diversity.

This publication grows out of the Cultural Mobility Webinar<sup>1</sup> organised by On the Move, which brought together practitioners, policymakers and advocates to explore how municipalities are developing travel grants, bilateral and multilateral exchange programmes, artist residencies and other initiatives that support the international mobility of artists and cultural professionals. The conversations that emerged confirmed what many in the field already sense: that city-led schemes are creating genuine opportunities to expand careers, build relationships across different regions of the world, and strengthen both artistic practice and long-term professional sustainability – yet they remain insufficiently recognised and under-promoted relative to the ambition and impact they represent.

Through a wide and varied range of programmes, cities have played an increasingly active role in supporting their local cultural ecosystems internationally. Their actions contribute to greater visibility and recognition for local artists on the world stage, sometimes through deliberate cultural export strategies, and equally through the hosting of international peers, the development of models of cultural hospitality, and a commitment to defending the diversity of cultural expressions. Such initiatives help ensure access to a plurality of creative practices, artistic forms and living cultural heritage – values that lie at the heart of a genuinely open and interconnected cultural world.

The report draws on the experiences and insights gathered through the webinar, taking stock of successful initiatives implemented through flagship frameworks such as the European Capitals of Culture programme, while also highlighting inspiring examples from the UNESCO Creative Cities Network, European and international city twinning programmes, and networks of cities actively supporting and hosting artists at risk. The analysis was carried out by experts Jordi Baltà Portolés, Ariane Bieou and Claire Rosslyn Wilson, whose contributions have been invaluable in shaping both the depth and the breadth of this publication.

Ultimately, this report is addressed to all cultural stakeholders with a view to providing concrete and actionable recommendations. These recommendations are grounded in the sources and practices analysed throughout, and reinforce observations and proposals emerging from relevant policy documents addressing the needs and challenges of artists and cultural professionals across a wide range of contexts. They point towards policy changes, funding initiatives and collaborative frameworks that can enhance international opportunities for all artists and cultural professionals, with particular attention to those who face the greatest structural barriers to mobility.

We hope this report will serve as a useful resource and a prompt for reflection and action among all those committed to making cultural mobility more equitable, more sustainable and more deeply embedded in the cultural policies of cities and institutions across Europe and beyond.

**Yohann Floch**

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1 The webinar *Cultural Mobility Webinar: City-led International Cultural Mobility* was organised on 18 March 2026, in collaboration with HowlRound, as part of On the Move's multiannual programme, New Solidarities, co-funded by the European Union.

# Responding to the City: Data on City-led International Cultural Mobility

by Claire Rosslyn Wilson

This document presents an analysis of open calls for cultural mobility opportunities posted on the On the Move website during a period from January 2020 to April 2026, with a focus on city-led mobility<sup>2</sup>. The data reflects the website's editorial policy and focus, which is on funded programmes that cover at least some of the costs of travel (or that offer remuneration in the case of online and/or remote programmes). In line with On the Move's editorial policy, there are no calls that have application fees. The calls that are posted to the website are generally one-off calls or calls that relate to temporary or shifting programmes rather than permanent ones (which are separately listed in the mobility funding guides<sup>3</sup>).

On the Move's website collects information on what open calls are related to 'urban space' themes, and this was the start of the research on relevant open calls. The next filter was the 'outdoor arts' and 'site-responsive' themes, which were then examined individually to assure that they were relevant for cities (rather than natural spaces, for example).

Beyond the themes that are recorded in On the Move's database, there were a few other approaches taken when identifying open calls related to city-led mobility. A key approach was to identify and then search for **specific programmes that have been formed around cities**. These include the UNESCO Creative Cities networks, Capitals of Culture (especially in the European and Mediterranean contexts) and the programme CreArt. The latter is a network of 13 European medium-sized cities that foster good practices and exchanges in contemporary art, through a permanent transnational mobility programme for emerging artists, curators and cultural agents. It began in 2012 and is now in its third iteration.

In selecting the open calls related to city-led mobility, we paid attention to **the role of the city itself in the project**. For example, it was not sufficient that an opportunity was simply based in a city, but rather the city needed to play a more significant role; for example, through programmes designed to highlight or support creative practice in cities (such as the UNESCO Creative Cities

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2 Unless otherwise stated, the links to On the Move's news pages were all published by On the Move and the URL was last checked in May and June 2026.

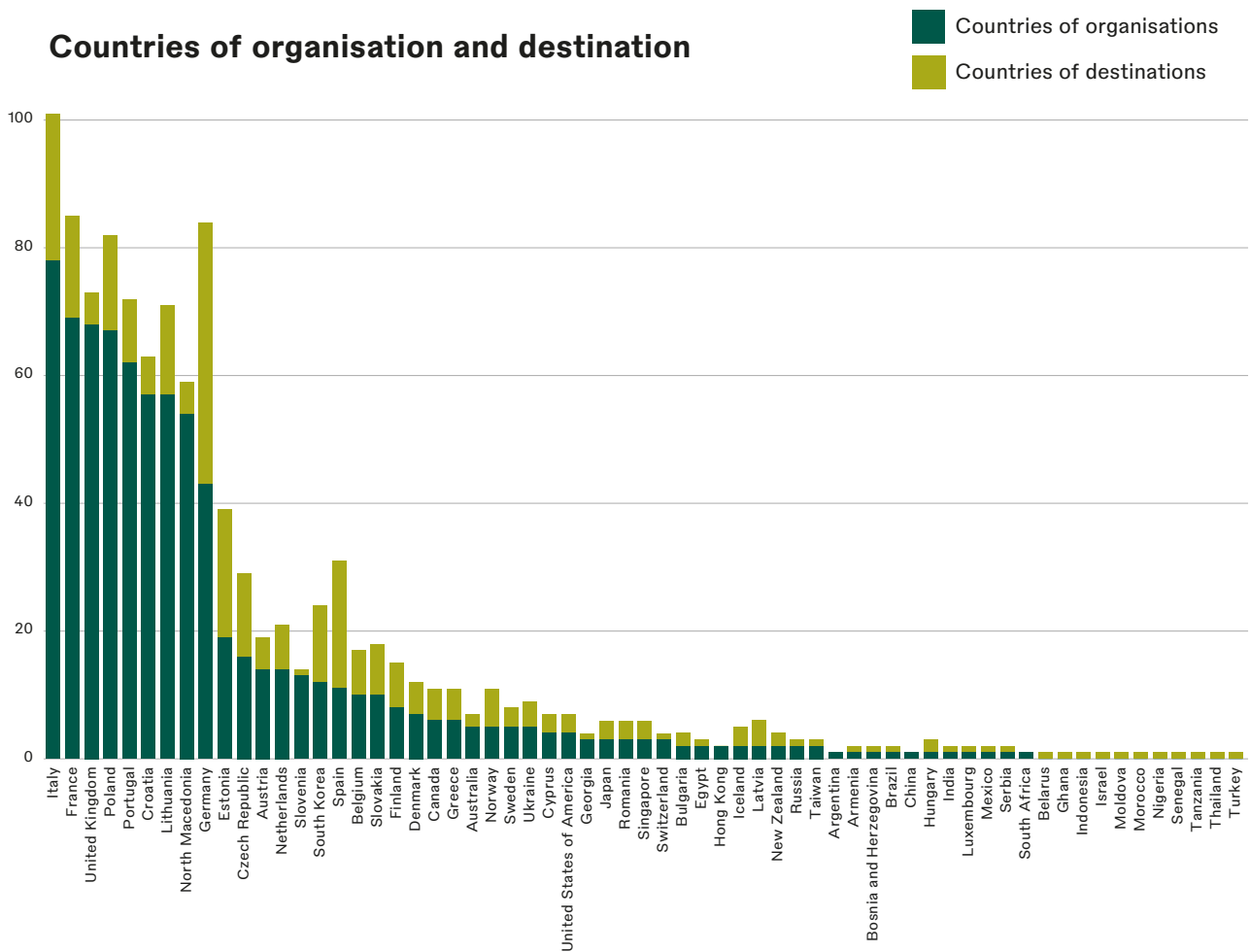
3 See more at the [Cultural Mobility Funding Guides](#).

networks, Capitals of Culture and CreArt) or through engagement with the city space (such as with site-responsive work or work created to be shown in the public, urban space).

These approaches give an indication of the relevant open calls on the website, however it is possible that some open calls were missed. Therefore, the aim of this section is to provide an insight into some relevant case studies, rather than being a comprehensive overview of all the funded opportunities in city-led mobility.

## Some key characteristics of the opportunities

Countries of organisation and destination



There were 284 open calls identified as being related to city-led mobility, published between January 2020 and April 2026.

When analysing all the **284 open calls**, there are some characteristics that can be identified.

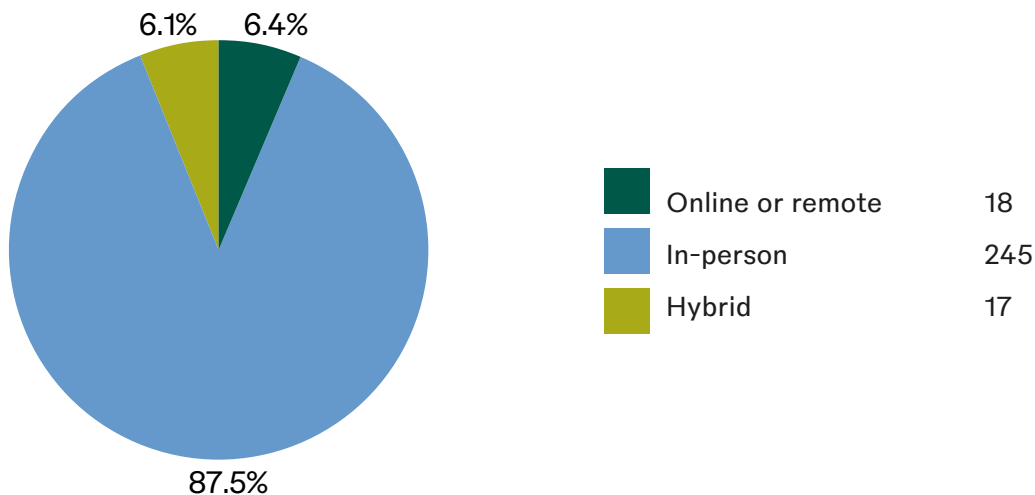
In terms of countries that were organisers of these open calls, the top five countries were Italy, France, United Kingdom, Poland, and Portugal (out of a total of 52 countries). Other countries that ranked highly were Croatia, Lithuania, North Macedonia and Germany. Some of these countries

are also represented in large numbers in the overall data, such as Germany (which had the greatest number of calls in Europe in the overall data), France, Italy, United Kingdom, Portugal or Croatia. There are others that have a greater number of open calls in this dataset, such as Poland, Lithuania, and North Macedonia. This could, in part, be explained by the large number of open calls as part of the CreArt programme, of which there are organisers from Poland, Lithuania, and North Macedonia.

With regards to the destination of these calls, the top 11 countries were Germany (with 41 open calls), Italy (23 open calls), Estonia and Spain (each with 20 open calls), France (16 open calls), Poland (15 open calls), Lithuania (14 open calls), Czech Republic (13 open calls), South Korea (12 open calls), Slovenia (11 open calls), and Portugal (10 open calls). All the other countries had under 10 open calls.

In terms of regions, **there were more open calls to and/or from Europe, which represented 93.8% of the organisers and 85.8% of the destinations for the open calls.** The other regions are represented in the order of Asia, the Americas, Oceania and Africa (all with under 10%). In general, this follows the overall trend of open calls. However, although the numbers are small, it is worth noting that here Oceania is not the region with the fewest number of organisations, as it is in the overall data.<sup>4</sup> As noted in the Cultural Mobility Handbook 2026, the few open calls in Oceania could be attributed in part to On the Move's editorial policy (in which bilateral open calls, open calls that are restricted to only one nationality, and ongoing grant programmes are not eligible). Therefore, it is interesting to note that international networks such as the UNESCO Creative Cities programme (present both in Australia and New Zealand) have helped to increase mobility in the region when compared to the overall data.

## Mode of delivery



For the mode of delivery, **the majority of the calls were in person (88%)**, with very few hybrid (6%) or online only (6%) open calls. In 2025 in the overall calls published on On the Move, 13.8%

were mixed mode while 4.4% were online only<sup>5</sup>. The fewer open calls for city-led mobility are perhaps to be expected, given that it is a place-based focus.

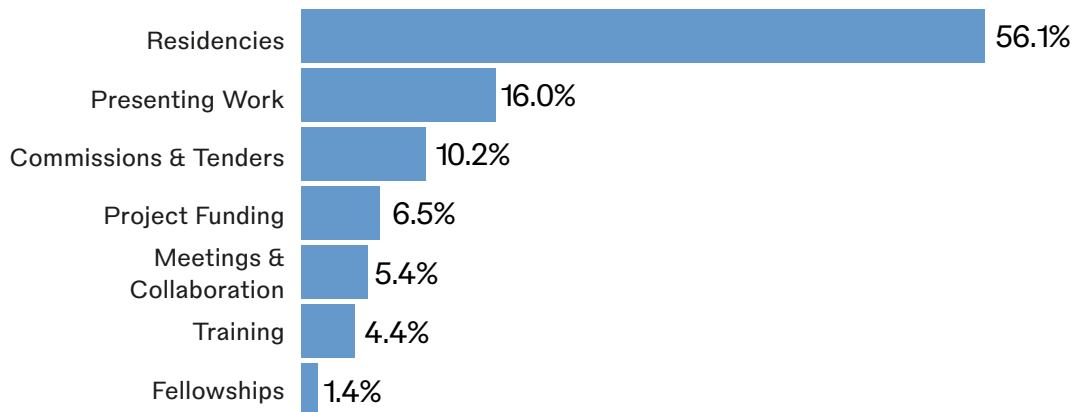
<sup>4</sup> For example, in 2025 there were only five open calls to or from Oceania, compared with 34 from Africa. See On the Move's [Cultural Mobility Yearbook 2026](#).

<sup>5</sup> For more information on trends in On the Move open calls, see the Cultural Mobility Yearbooks [2026](#), [2025](#), [2024](#), [2023](#), and [2022](#).

One example for a hybrid open call is worth mentioning is the one-year commission *ec(h)otoning*, part of a multi-phase research-based art programme run by the Mexican artist platform TRES as part of the Global Center of Spatial Methods for Urban Sustainability<sup>6</sup>. An ecotone is defined as a transitional area between two distinct ecosystems and by applying the term to the urban realm and converting it into a verb, the project aimed to extend this transitional area to mixed methodologies, as well as to different forms of knowledge and practice. The project

aimed to stimulate dialogue and collaboration on urban sustainability research addressing urban problems. The selected artist from the so-called Global South received mentorship from TRES and collaborated with scholars from Thailand, Indonesia and India, as well as participating in two in-person residencies; one at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok, and another at a one of three host universities. The ongoing support and ability of artists to choose the context they wished to explore further (within the partner network) make this an interesting hybrid model.

## Type of opportunity

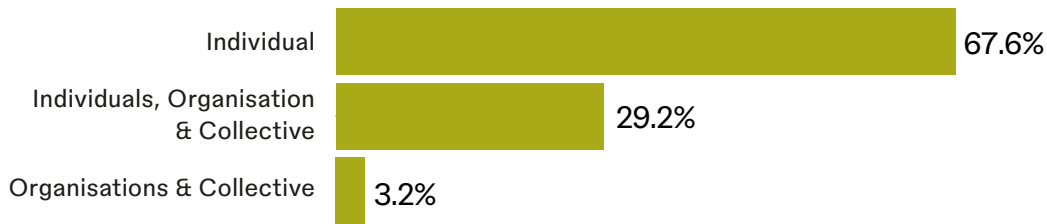


In terms of type of opportunities, the majority of the open calls were for residencies (56.1%), followed by presenting work (16%) and commissions and tenders (10.2%). When compared to the overall figures for open calls on the website in 2025, it can be seen that there is a much higher percentage of commissions and tenders opportunities in this

dataset. This could be due to the commission of art in public space, which requires an active engagement with the space, in this case of cities. Training and fellowships are also represented in a lower percentage here when compared with the overall data.

6 [TRES/SMUS: \*ec\(h\)otoning\* Research-based Art Commission for Artists from the Global South](#) (Thailand, India, Indonesia, online).

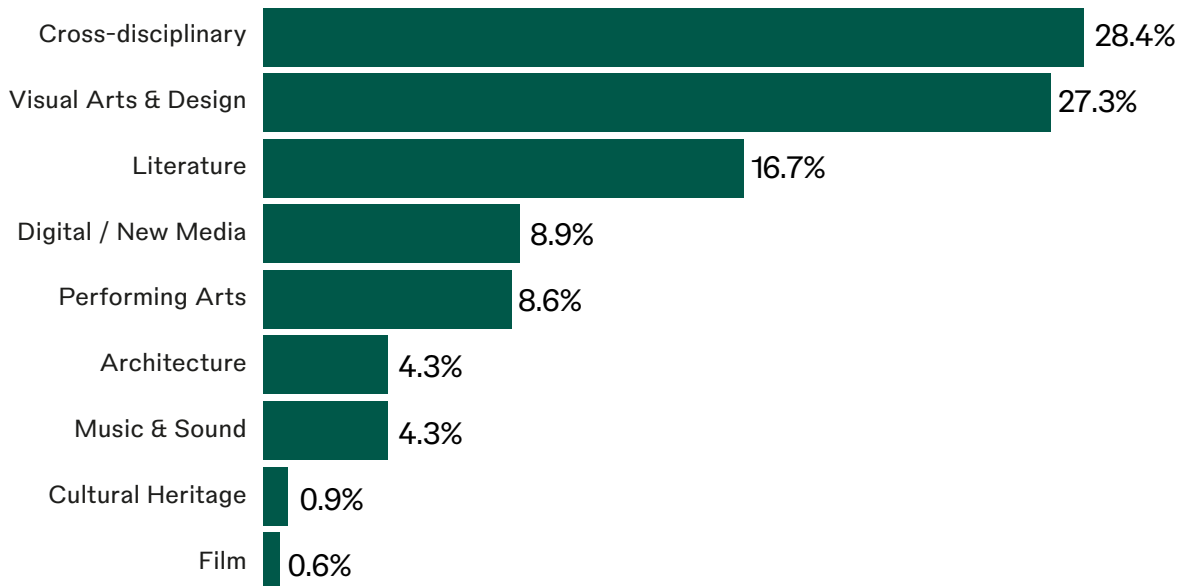
## Applicant type



With regards to who the opportunities were for, **there were more opportunities for individuals only (67.6%)** compared with organisations and/or collectives only (3.2%) or for both (29.2%). This is similar to the trends in the overall calls published on On the Move. The open calls also showed

a preference for artists (at 84.3%) more than curators, researchers and critics, or producers and managers. This is a higher percentage than those of the overall open calls, which in 2025 had 69.7% of opportunities for artists.

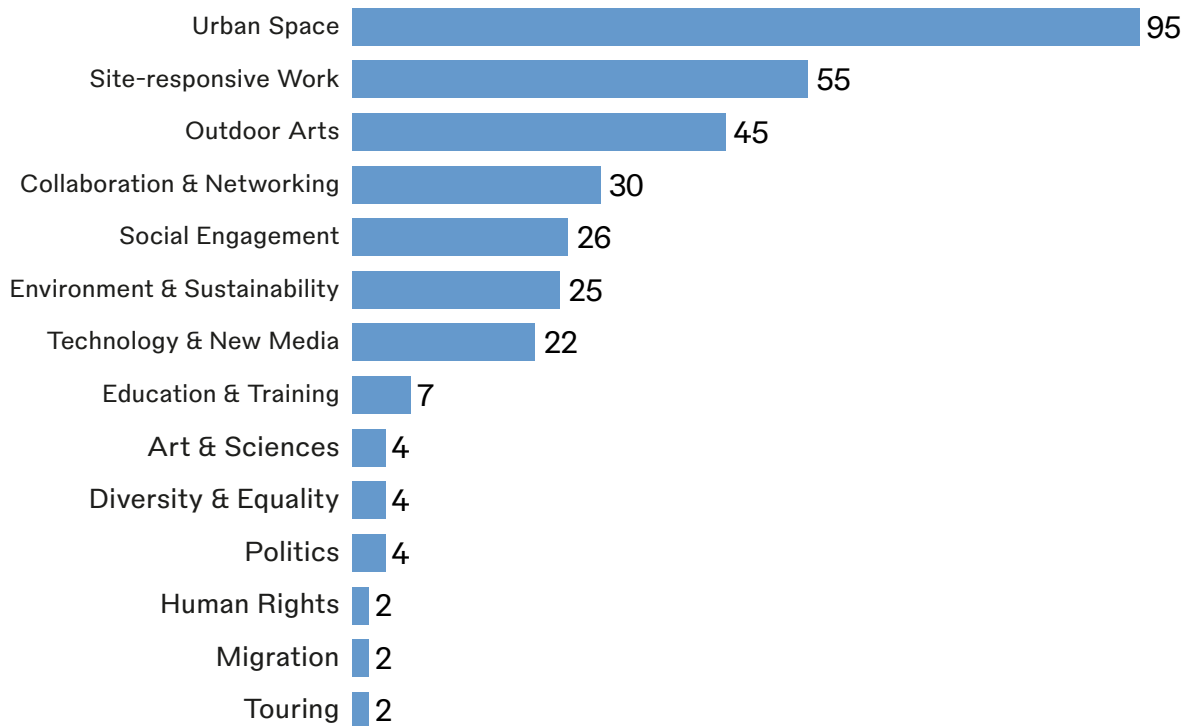
## Artistic field



As with the overall calls, **cross-disciplinary was the most common artistic field at 28.4%, followed by visual arts and design (27.3%) and literature (16.7%)**. It is interesting to note that in this city-led mobility focus, there is a higher percentage of open calls for literature, digital and new media and architecture. For literature in particular, and also for new media,

this could be attributed to the UNESCO Creative Cities network, as there were 58 open calls related to creative cities, the majority of which were for literature. In the case of literature, the overall percentage of open calls on On the Move in 2025 was 6.4%; therefore there is a significant increase with this city focus.

## Themes



Where the open calls listed a theme, the **top three themes were urban space, site-responsive work and outdoor arts**. This could be expected, given the way the research was conducted and also given the focus on city-led mobility. In the overall data, these themes are less dominant, and in 2025 the biggest theme was by far collaboration and networking, followed by environment and sustainability and education and training. Social engagement is another theme that has a higher representation in this dataset. This could be linked to the site- or community-responsive approach that several of the open calls took.

**There were 110 open calls that were funded by the European Union (38.7%).** Over 90% of them were for in-person opportunities and over 95% of them were for individuals or individuals and organisations/collectives. **Artists were the biggest target group at 83.3%.**

The countries with the highest number of open calls in this subsection were Germany and Spain, followed by Italy and France. There was one organiser based outside of Europe (the

Anna Lindh Foundation based in Egypt – 1.8% of the European Union-funded open calls) and six destination countries outside of Europe (Turkey, Egypt, Senegal, Ghana, Tanzania, and Nigeria – 3.6% of the European Union-funded open calls).

Residencies were by far the highest type of opportunity (at 57.4%) followed by presenting work (16.5%) and project funding (10.4%). This is similar to trends that can be found in the overall data. Visual arts and cross-disciplinary artistic fields were the largest groups, which is also similar to the overall data.

Cooperation projects were the highest source of European Union funding (at 56.3%), followed by 'other EU programmes' (at 33.6%). The high percentage of the latter, normally a small percentage of the overall data, is most likely due to the Capitals of Culture. Of the 284 open calls, there were four open calls that provided access costs (additional funding for those facing barriers to participation, which could cover childcare, disability costs, or more), while there was just one that provided costs for visas.

# City networks

## UNESCO Creative Cities network

As mentioned, many of the open calls in this dataset are from international networks and programmes based around cities. One of these is the UNESCO Creative Cities network. In this dataset, **58 open calls (20.4%) were identified as being part of this UNESCO network**. Most of these were in Europe, although there were also creative cities open calls in South Korea, Australia and New Zealand. The majority of these 58 open calls were for literature, although there were also open calls in cities of Media Arts<sup>7</sup>, Ceramics<sup>8</sup>, and Music<sup>9</sup>. In many cases, although not in all cases, an eligibility requirement was to have some connection to a UNESCO Creative City. These cities are in all regions, although some are better represented than others. **In May 2026, there were 408 UNESCO Creative Cities globally from more than 90 countries and across seven creative fields: Crafts and Folk Art, Design, Film, Gastronomy, Literature, Music, and Media Arts.**

Almost all of the UNESCO Creative Cities open calls were for residencies. There were some opportunities with project funding or presenting work, both of which were with the UNESCO Creative City of Media Arts Karlsruhe<sup>10</sup>. Residencies constitute the most common mobility type in

the overall data, however, this is particularly high when looking at the creative field of literature; in the 2025 data 78.2% of open calls in literature were for residencies (compared with 55.5% in visual arts and design or 41.4% in performing arts, to give a few examples). Therefore, given the high number of literature open calls here, it is not surprising to see that residencies dominate.

The main mode of delivery was in-person; 89.7% of the open calls were in-person, 8.6% were online and 1.7% were hybrid. All but one of the open calls was open to individuals, while there were an additional three open to both individuals and groups, collectives or organisations. The one open call only open to groups was Bydgoszcz's City of Music UNESCO Production Residency, which was open to duos.

The organisations with the highest number of open calls in the UNESCO Creative Cities published on On the Move were Tartu City of Literature (with seven open calls), Ljubljana UNESCO City of Literature (six), Wonju UNESCO City of Literature (five), Bucheon City of Literature, Kraków UNESCO City of Literature, and Melbourne UNESCO City of Literature (each with four open calls).

## European and Mediterranean Capitals of Culture

In this dataset of city-led mobility, from January 2020 to April 2026 there were 30 open calls identified as being for Capitals of Culture,

while there were an additional 17 open calls from European Capitals of Culture, but which were not necessarily part of the official programming.

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7 [Viborg UNESCO Creative City Artist Residency Programme](#) (Denmark), [UNESCO Creative City of Media Arts Karlsruhe: Funding for Media Art Projects in Outdoor Space](#) (Germany), [UNESCO Creative City of Media Arts Karlsruhe: Funding for Media Art Projects in Outdoor Space 2026](#) (Germany).

8 [Caldas da Rainha UNESCO Creative City Residency in Ceramics 2024](#) (Portugal).

9 [Bydgoszcz City of Music UNESCO: BPM DUO Production Residencies 2026](#) (Poland).

10 [UNESCO Creative City of Media Arts Karlsruhe: Funding for Media Art Projects in Outdoor Space](#) (Germany) and [UNESCO Creative City of Media Arts Karlsruhe: Funding for Media Art Projects in Outdoor Space 2026](#) (Germany).

The latter includes open calls mostly from the CreArt network or from UNESCO Creative Cities (especially Tartu, which was a European Capital of Culture in 2024, after they had become a City of Literature in 2015; all the open calls were dated between 2023 and 2026).

All of the 30 open calls identified were for in-person opportunities. There were three open calls that included destinations that were not in Europe; the Anna Lindh Foundation had two for Mediterranean Capitals of Culture and Dialogue (one in Egypt<sup>11</sup> and the other in Italy and Morocco<sup>12</sup>) while Kaunas 2022 had a residency in both Kaunas and Tel-Aviv, based on modernist heritage<sup>13</sup>. All the other open calls, unsurprisingly given the strength of the European Capitals of Culture programme when compared to other capitals programmes, were for destinations in Europe.

The European Capitals of Culture that had open calls on On the Move in this period were: Matera 2019 (Italy), Esch 2022 (Luxembourg), Kaunas 2022 (Lithuania), Elefsis 2023 (Greece), Timișoara 2023 (Romania), Veszprém 2023 (Hungary), Tartu 2024 (Estonia), Bodø 2024 (Norway), Chemnitz 2025 (Germany), Nova Gorica – Gorizia 2025 (Slovenia), Trenčín 2026 (Slovakia), Oulu 2026 (Finland), Évora 2027 (Portugal), Liepāja 2027 (Latvia), České Budějovice 2028 (Czech Republic), Skopje 2028 (North Macedonia), and Burgas 2032 (Bulgaria).

There was also an open call to support Turin's candidacy dossier for European Capital of Culture 2033<sup>14</sup>. Additionally, there was an open call that brought together the past European Capitals of Culture Gelsenkirchen (Ruhr 2010), Košice (2013), Matera (2019) to offer artists, creative or cultural operators a residency opportunity<sup>15</sup>,

which demonstrates the ongoing activity of some European Capitals of Culture.

In this subsection, project funding was the largest type of open call (at 43.3%), followed by residencies (at 26.7%), presenting work, and commissions and tenders (at 13.3% each). This marks a change from the overall open calls in 2025, for example, which saw residencies as the significantly larger type of open call, and project funding at third (with 11.3%).

**The artform with the highest representation is cross-disciplinary work (at 76.7%) followed by visual arts and design (at 16.7%).** This represents a much higher percentage of open calls for the cross-disciplinary artistic field when compared to the overall data (which had cross-disciplinary as the first artistic field in 2025, but at 29%). A total of 83.3% of the open calls were for either individuals or both individuals and organisations, while 56.7% of the open calls were either for organisations only or organisations and individuals. This represents a higher percentage of open calls that are available to organisations when compared with 2025's overall data (which had 41.3% of opportunities open to organisations).

An interesting example to highlight from these open calls is Oulu 2026's E75 Art Bus, which in 2025 hosted artist residencies together with an international residency network on the E75 road through Europe, passing through Norway, Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Serbia, North Macedonia, and Greece<sup>16</sup>. The new artworks produced in the project were experienced along the road (in 20+ stopping places) and on the bus. This is an interesting expansion beyond the city itself, into the ways the city can connect with other parts of Europe. It was also an interesting model in greener travel.

11 [Anna Lindh Foundation: Cultural and Intercultural Activities for Mediterranean Capitals of Culture and Dialogue 2025](#) (Egypt).

12 [Anna Lindh Foundation: Projects for Mediterranean Capitals of Culture 2026](#) (Italy, Morocco).

13 [Kaunas 2022: Artistic Residencies Kaunas Tel-Aviv](#) (Lithuania, Israel).

14 [L'Europa è di Casa: Artist Facilitators for Turin's European Capital of Culture 2033 Candidacy](#) (Italy).

15 [Cultour is Capital > Open Call for Cultour is Capital Fest](#) (Germany, Slovakia, Italy).

16 [E75 Art Bus Project and Artist Residency 2025–2026](#).

## CreArt

As of May 2026, CreArt 3.0 is a network of 13 European medium-sized cities. It was established in 2012, this is its third iteration, and it is funded by Creative Europe. The CreArt project consists of a permanent transnational mobility programme for emerging artists, curators and cultural agents. It began as a network for the visual arts, but in this latest iteration it is branching out into other artistic practices such as performative arts or music. One of the conditions of the programme is that only residents of the cities in the network can apply to their open calls.

In this dataset **52 open calls (18.3%) were identified as being part of the CreArt programme**. Apart from one published in 2020, all the open calls are in-person and all of them are for artists (mostly individuals, but four open

calls also accepted more than one artist). A total of 72.7% of the open calls were for residencies, while 21.8% were for presenting work and 5.5% were for commissions and tenders. In terms of creative fields, **80.8% of the open calls were for the visual arts**, reflecting the network's origins in that field. However, there were also cross-disciplinary fields accepted, as well as those in music and sound, performing arts, and digital or new media.

Spain had the highest number of open calls in which it was the receiving country, perhaps reflecting the fact that Valladolid (Spain) is one of the coordinating partners and that they are the hosting city of the festival CreaVA (which began in 2014 under the coordination of CreArt). The other countries with four or more open calls are Lithuania, Germany, France, and Poland.

# Responding to the city

## Art in the city

Aside from networks of cities working together, another way that open calls focused on cities was through calling for works that interacted with the city and its spaces. There were 121 open calls responding to the themes of urban space, site-responsive work or outdoor arts. Here we will look at a few examples of these open calls.

There were a number of ongoing initiatives that supported art in public urban spaces, such as the Urban Festival UIT<sup>17</sup>, Narva Art Residency<sup>18</sup> or Kunstkommission Düsseldorf's commission for art in public space<sup>19</sup>. There is not enough space to list in detail all the open calls related to art in urban spaces, but it is worth noting that they

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17 See, for example, [Urban Festival UIT: Call for Installations on 'Playful City'](#) (Estonia), [Urban Festival UIT: Open Call for Installations, 'Parasitic Architecture'](#) (Estonia), or [Urban Festival UIT: Call for Installations, 'Urban Pause'](#) (Estonia).

18 See, for example, [Narva Art Residency: Residency for Artists or Creative Duos to Create Sculptural Artworks or Urban Installations in Public Space](#) (Estonia), [Narva Art Residency: NAIR 2025 Public Space Installation Residency](#) (Estonia), [Narva Art Residency: NAIR 2026 Urban Installation Residency](#) (Estonia).

19 See, for example, [Kunstkommission Düsseldorf: Commission for Art in Public Space 2025](#) (Germany) or [Kunstkommission Düsseldorf: Commission for Art in Public Space 2026](#) (Germany).

represented a diverse range of artforms, such as new media and video productions<sup>20</sup>, performing arts<sup>21</sup>, street art<sup>22</sup>, design and architecture<sup>23</sup>, and monuments or sculpture<sup>24</sup>.

Many of the open calls also explored specific themes relevant to their cities, in addition to the response to the specific urban context. For example, the City of Hamburg called for artists to produce a monument or contemplative space for sexual and gender diversity<sup>25</sup> while Santa Maria da Feira, a creative city of gastronomy, sought to promote dialogue between gastronomy and the

performing arts, digital arts, media arts, robotics and technologies<sup>26</sup>.

Another area where there were many open calls was in the area of light and media projections. These were promoted by cities themselves, such as the City of Napa<sup>27</sup>, Singapore<sup>28</sup> or Jyväskylä<sup>29</sup>, or they were led by light festivals, such as DLECTRICITY<sup>30</sup> (inspired by Nuit Blanche arts festivals from around the world), BLIK BLIK<sup>31</sup> (which was first held in Plzeň when it was a capital of culture in 2015), the biennial festival LINZ FMR<sup>32</sup> or Toronto's Nuit Blanche<sup>33</sup>.

## Future sustainable cities

Another way of interacting with the city was through topics of sustainability in an urban context or through imagining the future of cities. The CreArt programme, for example, had several open calls that centred themes of environment through land art or installations in public space that responded to the local environments<sup>34</sup>.

The S+T+ARTS programme, which bridges science, technology and arts, had a number of open calls on themes such as food and agriculture, emergence of ecologically conscious technology uses, or sustainable construction in the context of cities<sup>35</sup>.

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20 See, for example, [A-Place: Open Call for Video Productions in Six European Cities](#) or [Curiosity Brisbane > Call for Interactive Digital and Physical Installations](#) (Australia).

21 See, for example, [City of Holzminden / kulturbüro > Call for Artists for International Street Theatre Festival](#) (Germany) or [Busan International Comedy Festival: Comedy Street Performers 2026](#) (South Korea).

22 See, for example, [Veszprém 2023: Street Art Open Call](#) (Hungary), [CreArt > Mural Commission for Rouen Impressionnée](#), or [CreArt > Call for Chinese New Year Mural Project in Liverpool](#) (Remote).

23 See, for example, [Open Calls for Concéntrico 08 – International Festival of Architecture and Design of Logroño](#) (Spain), [Seoul Biennale of Architecture and Urbanism > Call for Proposals, Co-Crea: LINK – Urban Art Festival 2024 Participatory Design Project](#) (Italy), or [MAGENTA / Kaunas 2022: Open Call for Festival of Landscape Design and Environmental Art](#) (Lithuania).

24 See, for example, [POLDRA – Public Sculpture Project Viseu: Open Call for a Site-Specific Public Artwork](#) (Portugal), [City of Malmö: Commission for an Antiracist Monument in Jesusparken](#) (Sweden), or [LeuWebb Projects/Heavy: Scotia Place Public Art Commissions](#) (Canada).

25 [City of Hamburg: Open Call for Monument / Contemplative Space for Sexual and Gender Diversity](#) (Germany).

26 [Santa Maria da Feira: Creative City of Gastronomy temperART 2024](#) (Portugal).

27 [City of Napa: Napa Lighted Art Festival 2026](#) (USA).

28 See, for example, [Open Call for i Light Singapore 2023, 'A New Wave'](#) (Singapore), [Open Call for i Light Singapore 2024, 'Cyclical Nature'](#) (Singapore), [i Light Singapore 2025 'To Gather'](#) (Singapore).

29 [City of Light Jyväskylä: Light Festival and Residency Artists](#) (Finland).

30 [DLECTRICITY 2020 Open Call for Light-based Art + Technology](#).

31 [BLIK BLIK: Light Festival Call 2025](#) (Czech Republic).

32 [LINZ FMR: Artist-in-Residence 2025/26 for Digital Art in Public Space](#) (Austria).

33 [Delegation of the European Union to Canada / OCAD University: Site-Specific Work for Nuit Blanche 2025](#) (Canada).

34 See, for example, [CreArt: Artist Residency in Clermont-Ferrand 2024](#) (France), [CreArt: Artist in Residence Frozen People Festival 2025](#) (Finland), [CreArt: Kaunas Land Residency and Art Installation in Public Spaces 2025](#) (Lithuania), [CreArt: Kaunas Residency and Environmental Art Installation in Public Spaces 2026](#) (Lithuania).

35 See, for example, [S+T+ARTS Hungry EcoCities for Artists in the Agri-Food Sector](#), [S+T+ARTS in the City Residencies](#) (Belgium, Italy, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain), [STARTS4AFRICA Residency Programme](#) (Senegal, Ghana, Tanzania, Nigeria), [S+T+ARTS EC\(H\)O Residency Programme](#) (Germany, Austria, France).

There were open calls that responded to the particular challenges of environmental sustainability in cities. For example, Khoj's project called on South Asian artists to explore air pollution, as part of a three-year project supported by the Prince Claus Fund that focused on Delhi's poor air quality<sup>36</sup>. Another more recent project call Cycle Up tackled green mobility in and between cities with two residencies on bicycle cultures<sup>37</sup>. The artists were required to create impactful interventions to inspire local communities and decision makers to reimagine bike-friendly, inclusive urban spaces across four cities: Broumov, Czech Republic; České Budějovice, Czech Republic; Katowice, Poland; and Tartu, Estonia. Residents were also supported to take green travel options to and/or from the residency itself. The project published a number of tools as a result of the residency, one of which was *Sustaining Creativity: The honest guide to sustainable residencies*<sup>38</sup>. (More analysis of green residencies can be found in *On the Move's Mobility Funding Guide: Greening Artistic Residencies Focus on Creative Europe Countries*)<sup>39</sup>. Another open call that explored sustainable travel was SUSTAIN, a two-year programme of professional development and artist exchange focused on developing low carbon and ecologically aware ways of producing and experiencing art, between Greater Manchester and the Aarhus region<sup>40</sup>.

Another approach to sustainability in cities were open calls that required artists to consider the environmental impact of their proposals. An example is i Light Singapore, a sustainable light

festival in which the artworks are designed with energy-saving lightings and/or environmentally friendly materials to encourage festival goers and the general public to adopt sustainable habits in their everyday lives<sup>41</sup>. This is particularly interesting for a light festival, which must consume a significant amount of energy during the festival to run the artworks. Another example that is trying to promote more sustainable solutions in the arts sector is the project European Concert Halls Offering Eco-Solutions (ECHOES), which had an open call for Eco-Soundscapes for artists working at the intersection of sound, ecology, and sustainability<sup>42</sup>. ECHOES helps venues to adopt sustainable practices (though resources and low-impact tours) while supporting artists to co-create original musical works inspired by natural soundscapes.

Some open calls explored the heritage of industrial sites in cities and ways of imagining post-industrial futures. For example, the organisation Circolo Scandinavo called for Nordic artists and researchers to explore unused or abandoned urban sites in Rome, joining local inhabitants, artists, architects, and experts for a collective exploration of unused or abandoned urban sites<sup>43</sup>. In Canada, the DePOT artist-in-resident programme offered a fellowship to explore the general 'Deindustrialization and the Politics of Our Time'<sup>44</sup>. The 7-year SSHRC partnership, based at the Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling at Concordia University, brought together 36 partner organisations across six countries in Western Europe and North America (Germany, France, Italy, the

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36 [Khoj > Open Call 'Does the Blue Sky Lie? Testimonies of Air's Toxicities'](#).

37 See [Cycle Up: Artist Residency on Bicycle Cultures 2025](#) (Czech Republic, Estonia, Poland) and [Cycle Up: Artist Residency on Bicycle Cultures](#) (Czech Republic, Estonia, Germany, Poland, Slovakia).

38 [CYCLE UP!](#), *Sustaining Creativity: The honest guide to sustainable residencies*.

39 Attard, T.; Eskola, J.; Mušič N.; Panevska, B.; van Nieuwland, M.; Wilson, C. R., *Mobility Funding Guide: Greening Artistic Residencies (Focus on Creative Europe Countries)*. On the Move, 2025.

40 [Castlefield Gallery / Aarhus Center for Visual Art: SUSTAIN – Digital Exchange & Slow Travel Residency](#) (Denmark, UK).

41 [i Light Singapore 2025 'To Gather'](#) (Singapore).

42 [European Concert Halls Offering Eco-Solutions: Production and Tour for Artists in Sound, Ecology, and Sustainability](#) (Romania, Greece, Norway, Ukraine).

43 [Circolo Scandinavo: Call for Nordic Artists to Explore Unused or Abandoned Urban Sites](#) (Italy).

44 [DePOT: Artist Fellowships, 'Deindustrialization and the Politics of Our Time'](#) (Canada).

United Kingdom, United States, and Canada). It examined the historical roots and lived experience of deindustrialisation as well as the political responses to it. A multi-residency programme in Romania, run by EUNIC, also explored post-industrial futures across countries in their Reclaiming Post-Industrial Futures residency, with applicants from eight countries in Europe<sup>45</sup>.

Envisioning the future of cities was a theme that was explored in several open calls. Some programmes called on artists to design soundscapes for future cities<sup>46</sup>, others focused on storytelling<sup>47</sup>, and others drew from design disciplines<sup>48</sup>. Another approach was an Experimental Production to conceptualise and realise Open Urban Forest, commissioned by the CreaTures consortium (Creative Practices for Transformational Futures)<sup>49</sup>. The commission was to explore multiple voices, relations, and stories that form and emerge from an urban forest, which can inspire new ways to imagine socio-

ecologically sustainable futures. The project particularly focused on the interaction between technology and stories, traditions, and cultures deeply rooted in place. The key themes included attuning and listening, care and reciprocity, indigenous ways of being and knowing, deep time, and more-than-human worlds.

As can be seen in this chapter, there are many ways to engage with the city and invite international mobility in specific, urban contexts. Networks that connect cities, such as UNESCO Cities of Literature, Capitals of Culture, or the Creative Europe-funded project CreArt, are invaluable for supporting ongoing programmes and regular open calls, building momentum in specific cities. However, the dynamism of cities also provides fertile space for site-responsive work and interventions in public space across different disciplines. This is especially the case in the context of environmental sustainability, as cities can be both pressure points and hubs for creative solutions.

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45 [EUNIC: Reclaiming Post-Industrial Futures Residency 2025](#) (Romania).

46 [ReSilence: Open Call for Artists to Design Soundscapes for Future Cities, Asia Culture Center: 'Futures of Listening' Residency](#) (South Korea).

47 [Reimagine Your City: Audio Storytelling Lab, 'Common Futures'](#) (Germany, Moldova).

48 [Open Call for International Design Lab 'Reimagine Your City'](#) (Germany, Georgia, online).

49 [CreaTures / RMIT Europe: 'Open Urban Forest' Commission to Imagine Sustainable Futures](#) (online, Spain).

# Cities of Exchange and Care: Rethinking Scopes of Action

by Yohann Floch

European cities have become pivotal actors in enabling the international mobility of artists and cultural professionals, a role that has acquired renewed urgency in the context of an increasingly complex ‘polycrisis’, marked by economic pressure, geopolitical instability, climate challenges and shrinking public budgets. In such a landscape, mobility can no longer be regarded as a peripheral or optional dimension of cultural policy; rather, it constitutes a fundamental condition for artistic development, international collaboration and access to new markets. As Julie Hervé, Head of Culture and Democracy at [Eurocities](#), puts it during the On the Move’s Cultural Mobility Webinar, mobility is ‘increasingly becoming a priority and is mentioned in local cultural strategies, political texts, and action plans that cities update regularly.’ **Cities are well positioned at the intersection of cultural ecosystems and public policy, often representing the level of governance closest to artists and cultural operators.** As such, they are also well placed to respond to emerging needs. Municipalities are now expected not only to welcome international artists, but also to support the outward mobility of their local creative communities, helping them navigate reduced national funding and increasingly competitive international environments.

Behind this growing commitment lie several overlapping motivations. As Hervé identifies, cities are driven by the growing importance of culture in international policies, by the ambition to support artistic innovation and offer local practitioners the opportunity to discover what is happening abroad, and by the desire to renew local arts and culture through the presence of international artists. There is also a more explicitly strategic dimension: cities increasingly view artists and cultural professionals as ambassadors on the international stage.

‘*Cities see artists and cultural professionals as ambassadors for their city abroad. It’s a powerful concept. And, of course, there’s the goal of expanding cultural audiences and markets. We sometimes talk about ‘territorial diplomacy’ or the diplomacy of local governments.*’

– Julie Hervé, Head of Culture and Democracy, Eurocities

This framing – culture as territorial diplomacy – captures something important about the contemporary ambitions of city-level cultural policy. It also points to a genuine strength: unlike national agencies or international organisations, cities act directly through their relationships with local artists and organisations.

The economic stakes of this engagement are substantial. A 2025 study by DutchCulture,<sup>50</sup> commissioned by the City of Amsterdam, offers one of the most comprehensive mappings to date of the value of international cultural cooperation at city level. It reveals that international cultural cooperation generates up to EUR 10.6 billion in added value for the Dutch economy annually – several times the amount invested – with around 27% of total cultural production destined for export. Strikingly, the study also identifies

an 85% correlation between the volume of cultural exports and total trade in goods and services among the Netherlands' top ten export partners, suggesting that cultural cooperation does not merely generate its own value but actively paves the way for wider economic relations. While these figures are specific to the Netherlands, they point to a broader truth that applies across European cities: **investing in international cultural cooperation is not only the right thing to do, it is a smart thing to do.**

## From periphery to priority: the role of cities in the international trajectories of artists

The shift from cities as passive beneficiaries of national and European cultural policies to active architects of mobility frameworks is one of the most significant developments of the past decade. Networks such as Eurocities and United Cities and Local Governments ([UCLG](#)) have been instrumental in aggregating and amplifying this shift, translating local practices into policy advocacy and enabling knowledge exchange between municipalities with very different capacities and starting points.

Data gathered through Eurocities' work on city-led mobility programmes reveals both the scale and the character of this engagement. Visual arts, performing arts – particularly theatre – and music are the three disciplines most frequently supported by cities, reflecting the intersection of what is locally produced and what travels well internationally. This disciplinary pattern also mirrors the types of infrastructure

– studios, theatres, concert venues – that cities are best positioned to offer to incoming artists and companies.

From the perspective of UCLG, this local engagement must be understood within a broader normative framework. Jordi Pascual, Coordinator of the Committee on Culture at UCLG, underlines the need to ground cultural mobility not merely in economic rationale or urban competitiveness, but in the principle of cultural rights:

*‘UCLG launched Agenda 21 for Culture, with a very explicit metaphor: culture is the fourth pillar of sustainable development. Not an instrument for economic growth, not a tool for fundamentalism – whether national, religious, or economic – but a pillar in its own right.’*

– Jordi Pascual, Coordinator, Committee on Culture, UCLG

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50 More details in [The Impact of International Cultural Cooperation – Beyond the Borders, Beyond the Figures](#), DutchCulture, October 2025.

This rights-based orientation is reflected in UCLG's Culture 21 Actions toolkit, which includes over one hundred questions serving as a mirror for local cultural policies and explicitly addresses initiatives on the mobility of artists and the protection of those at risk. In 2020, UCLG contributed to the [Rome Charter](#), which formally recognised the

need to support international cooperation and the protection of artists in precarious situations. Jordi Pascual is clear that these commitments are inseparable: **supporting mobility means supporting the conditions – legal, financial, social – that make it possible for all artists to move.**

## Structural challenges: barriers, inequalities and the limits of short-term thinking

This expanded role, however, is accompanied by significant structural challenges. Administrative barriers continue to hinder seamless cross-border mobility, as visa regimes, social security coordination, taxation rules and complex funding procedures impose disproportionate burdens, particularly on independent artists and small organisations. These barriers are not evenly distributed: they weigh most heavily on practitioners from outside the European Union, for whom entry into European cultural circuits remains a formidable obstacle.

Jordi Pascual highlights the acute difficulties faced by African artists and cultural professionals invited to participate in European events:

*‘In Africa, artists and cultural professionals face significant difficulties when invited to Europe, particularly with visas. This is a huge problem. From an institutional perspective, we’ve noticed a growing interest among European Capitals of Culture to connect with other continents, especially Africa and Latin America. Montpellier, for example, has been very active in connecting with Africa. The Canary Islands are another example – we believe the new framework for the European Capitals of Culture should be more ambitious in this regard. In fact, this message of*

*connecting Europe to the world should have been included in the current framework (2020–2033). It was a missed opportunity.’*

– Jordi Pascual, Coordinator, Committee on Culture, UCLG

Access to international opportunities also remains deeply uneven across the European urban landscape. Larger metropolitan areas, endowed with well-developed cultural infrastructures and specialised expertise in European funding mechanisms, are far better positioned to engage in international programmes than smaller or peripheral cities. This produces an uneven geography of opportunity in which mobility is concentrated in already well-connected hubs, reinforcing rather than correcting existing hierarchies.

Local cultural players frequently face a structural dependence on European funding cycles. While such programmes provide indispensable support, they also introduce volatility: funding is tied to competitive calls and shifting priorities rather than long-term strategies, making it difficult for municipalities to sustain mobility schemes beyond project timelines. This is compounded by the risk that short-term formats – residencies in particular – may substitute rather than complement other forms of support, such as travel grants, touring schemes or sustained co-production funding.

Jordi Pascual raises another systemic concern that is often underestimated: the capacity of receiving cities and organisations to host visiting artists in a meaningful way.

‘ *There’s the need to ensure that local coordination teams responsible for mobility have the capacity to host visiting artists. Historically, agencies managing artistic mobility have been international organisations or professional associations. Cities are relatively new actors in this field,*

*but they’re becoming increasingly active, with more resources. It’s crucial that the hosting team has the capacity to support visiting artists – and this doesn’t always happen.’*

– Jordi Pascual, Coordinator, Committee on Culture, UCLG

This points to a gap that investment and programme design rarely address adequately: the relational and institutional infrastructure required to **make mobility genuinely transformative rather than merely transactional.**

## Cities as strategic mobility hubs: a dual function

Within this constrained yet dynamic environment, cities are increasingly positioning themselves as strategic mobility hubs, operating simultaneously as hosts of international talent and as export platforms for their local cultural ecosystems. This dual role reflects a broader transformation in the organisation of cultural production, circulation and value creation within an interconnected global context.

On one hand, cities act as **entry points for international artists and cultural professionals**, offering residencies, co-production opportunities, festivals and institutional partnerships. On the other hand, they serve as **launchpads for outward mobility**, supporting local artists and organisations in accessing international markets, audiences and professional networks. This dual function is not only culturally significant but also economically and strategically consequential: international cultural cooperation generates substantial added value, with a significant share of cultural sector output linked to export activities in certain contexts.

Urban cultural ecosystems increasingly resemble nodes within global circulation systems, where the movement of artists, works and ideas contributes simultaneously to artistic innovation, economic

development and international positioning. The DutchCulture study is instructive here: it identifies three distinct but mutually reinforcing categories of value generated by international cultural cooperation – artistic value, through the stimulation of innovation, knowledge exchange and more diverse programming; societal value, through contributions to individual wellbeing, social cohesion and civic engagement; and diplomatic and relational value, through the strengthening of bilateral ties, multilateral networks and public diplomacy. Cultural institutions embedded in such ecosystems – ranging from festivals and museums to performing arts venues – tend to integrate international collaboration as a core component of their identity rather than as a supplementary activity. The Amsterdam case is particularly instructive: the city accounts for more than half of all Dutch art and cultural activities exported abroad, despite representing only 20% of jobs in the cultural and creative sector nationally – a disparity that underlines just how strongly a city’s international orientation can amplify its cultural output well beyond its domestic scale.

In practical terms, cities operationalise this dual role through a combination of instruments: participation in European cooperation projects,

engagement in transnational networks, support schemes for touring and international promotion, and the hosting of festivals, biennials and artist residencies. Among these, residencies have become particularly prominent, offering visible and flexible formats for attracting international talent and fostering exchange. However, the growing importance of Artist-in-Residence programmes reflects a broader policy shift towards project-based and short-term mobility formats, accompanied by a narrowing of the support landscape: **fewer funding opportunities exist for artists working outside this residency format, and fewer pathways remain available for engaging internationally through other means – such as commissioning or co-production schemes.**

Jordi Pascual emphasises that the most meaningful and durable forms of this engagement cannot happen without the active involvement of civil society:

*‘ Our recommendations are explicit: nothing meaningful or long-term can happen in cultural policy unless civil society is empowered, involved, and at the centre. ’*

– Jordi Pascual, Coordinator, Committee on Culture, UCLG

He also stresses the importance of making the connection between the visiting artist and the life of the host city explicit – not as a side effect of mobility but as its primary purpose:

*‘ From a cultural rights perspective, it’s essential to promote this connection. Artists who stay in a city for a month or a year should be integrated so that local residents understand the value of their contribution. We need to make the connection between the local and the global explicit, because cities have always been shaped by migration and mobility. When policies become solid and long-term, the link between the global and the local must be as clear as possible. ’*

– Jordi Pascual, Coordinator, Committee on Culture, UCLG

## EU programmes as engines for transnational cultural cooperation and mobility

The European Capitals of Culture ([ECoC](#)), one of EU’s flagship programmes, has long demonstrated its decisive role in shaping how cities engage with cultural mobility, providing not only financial support but also strategic orientations, governance models and incentives that encourage the integration of internationalisation into long-term urban cultural development.

What is less widely recognised is the scale of the programme’s reach beyond its designated titleholders. The ECoC process attracts hundreds of cities across Europe, drawn by the prospect of cultural, social, economic and infrastructural

transformation. Yet over 80% of bidding cities do not win the title – and for many of them, the extraordinary mobilisation of talents, ideas, resources and community energy that the bidding process generates risks being lost once the competition concludes. It is precisely this challenge that [Culture Next](#) was established to address. Founded in 2017, the network supports ECoC candidates and promotes the implementation of ECoC-inspired programmes in cities and regions across Europe, helping all cities – successful or otherwise – to translate the momentum of the bidding process into sustainable, culture-led local development. Building on the partnerships, expertise and civic engagement mobilised during

the bid, Culture Next works to ensure that the ECoC initiative generates meaningful and lasting legacy well beyond the title year and well beyond the cities that win it. Its underlying conviction is that cities are hubs for democracy, inclusivity and innovation, and that culture acts as the catalyst for this ecosystem – meaning that the more cities sustain ambitious cultural programmes, the greater Europe’s collective capacity to address shared challenges and seize shared opportunities.

This broader ecosystem of engagement makes the ECoC programme far more than a competition: it is, in effect, a Europe-wide infrastructure for cultural capacity-building, international networking and long-term mobility. Kelly Diapouli, Artistic Director of [Larnaka 2030](#), one of the designated European Capitals of Culture, describes the programme’s scope in unambiguous terms:

*‘Regarding the European Capital of Culture programme, I’d say it’s perhaps the largest EU mobility project. All projects must have a European dimension, meaning they involve cooperation between artists from different EU countries, whether through invitations or co-productions. It turns out that about 30% of the artistic programmes involve international artists, which means they involve cultural mobility.’*

– Kelly Diapouli, Artistic Director, Larnaka 2030 European Capital of Culture

One of the most distinctive and underappreciated features of the programme is its reach into smaller and peripheral cities – precisely those that have historically been excluded from major international cultural circuits.

*‘The programme extends cultural mobility to the periphery of Europe. Most of the cities that have been Capitals of Culture in the past decade are peripheral or smaller cities, like this year’s cities in Finland and Slovakia<sup>51</sup>. It’s interesting that we’re not just talking about major cities but also*

*focusing on smaller centres, where major cultural organisations like national theatres, operas, or big festivals aren’t operating. The programme reaches out to artists and cultural operators living in the periphery, not just the big names or national artists, but also emerging and mid-career artists.’*

– Kelly Diapouli, Artistic Director, Larnaka 2030 European Capital of Culture

This democratisation of mobility – **extending opportunity to emerging artists, to smaller cities, to the geographical margins of Europe** – is one of the ECoC programme’s most significant contributions to the field. It is accompanied by systematic investment in local capacity, a dimension that often receives less attention than the headline cultural programming. Perhaps most importantly, the effects of ECoC engagement persist well beyond the title year. Kelly Diapouli points to Timișoara as an emblematic example of a city that has institutionalised this commitment:

*‘There’s an interesting aspect to the legacy of the Capitals of Culture. We often see that, even after the title year, there’s a focus on continuing this internationalisation of practice. For example, Timișoara has invested over 1 million euros and continues to fund mobility – both for artists from Timișoara to travel abroad and for works from other EU countries to be presented in Timișoara.’*

– Kelly Diapouli, Artistic Director, Larnaka 2030 European Capital of Culture

Beyond the ECoC, a broader ecosystem of European programmes sustains city-level engagement in cultural mobility. [Culture Moves Europe](#) provides the demand-led individual mobility support that complements the offer-led logic of flagship programmes, while instruments such as the EU [Twinning Programme](#) foster long-term structural relationships between municipalities, creating favourable conditions for sustained peer exchange and cross-border cultural collaboration. [Creative Europe](#) cooperation projects and

51 [Oulu](#) (Finland) and [Trenčín](#) (Slovakia).

platforms supporting emerging artists further extend the range of formats through which cities and cultural organisations can engage internationally, each providing distinct thematic and geographic frameworks within which partners pursue shared ambitions.

Transnational networks play an equally constitutive role in this ecosystem – not merely as facilitators of exchange but as political actors shaping the conditions under which cultural mobility happens. Established in 1986, Eurocities brings together more than 200 of Europe's larger cities across 38 countries, representing over 150 million people, with a mission to make cities places where everyone can enjoy a good quality of life. It provides a platform for cities to share knowledge and ideas, explore common challenges and develop innovative solutions, while striving to ensure that cities have a meaningful seat at the table when decisions are made at European level. Its work on cultural mobility translates the lived experience of cities into policy recommendations at European level, ensuring that the practical realities of city-led programmes inform the design of the frameworks meant to support them.<sup>52</sup>

In the field of culture, Eurocities' member cities promote and support culture as a means of social change, recognising its role in economic development and in broader sustainable development. This commitment is translated into concrete activities with a mobility dimension, including the Eurocities Culture Forum – an annual event that enables discussion, the exchange of experiences and joint advocacy among member cities and wider stakeholders. Beyond peer exchange, Eurocities also engages directly in EU-funded projects that connect the local and the international. It is currently a member of the [European Heritage Hub](#), a pilot project launched by the European Union and

coordinated by Europa Nostra, which ran as a preparatory action from 2023 to 2025 and has been extended through to 2027. The Hub aims to foster the structuring of stakeholders and initiatives in the field of cultural heritage at European, national and local level. Within this framework, Eurocities coordinates a capacity-building and peer-learning component that has already identified twenty local good practices on cultural heritage and local transformation, and organised a series of study visits and webinars open to local decision-makers and practitioners.<sup>53</sup> The project has also established local hubs in Athens, Kraków, Lisbon and Nicosia to facilitate regional networking around shared areas of interest, and has produced a mapping of heritage policies and relevant literature on the relationships between cultural heritage and the social, digital and green transformations – providing cities with an evidence base to inform their own cultural development strategies.

Complementing its broader support offer, Culture Next has developed a dedicated [mobility programme](#) exclusively available to its full members – and deliberately designed to be as simple and user-friendly as possible. The programme enables cultural professionals to travel to other member cities to observe and learn from specific practices and working methods, with each participating city committing to send three professionals to different member cities and to host three incoming professionals in return, with exchanges arranged at different times and to different destinations to maximise the diversity of learning. Crucially, the programme operates on a permanent open call basis: mobility exchanges can be proposed and arranged between members at any time on a rolling basis, avoiding the constraints of fixed application windows and allowing cities to respond to their own development needs and rhythms. **The mobility programme is closely**

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52 Recent topics of interest have included the design of new spaces for culture and sustainability and inclusion in local cultural policy, for example '[Spaces for vibrant cultural and creative scenes](#)', Eurocities, 2 October 2025; and '[100+ initiatives, 60 cities, one commitment: low-carbon and inclusive culture in action](#)', Eurocities, 9 January 2026.

53 See for example '[Hub announces Open Call results, selecting 10 innovative practices in cities across Europe](#)', European Heritage Hub, 27 March 2024; and '[Hub selects 10 new Local Good Practices across Europe from Open Call](#)', European Heritage Hub, 9 March 2026.

**integrated with Culture Next’s wider capacity-building ambitions:** it facilitates the exchange of knowledge and expertise tailored to the specific needs of cities at different stages of the ECoC candidacy process, and is complemented by free access to the network’s annual training programme for cultural cities – a programme built on the self-identified needs of members and funded through suitable European grants. Together, these instruments offer a practical and peer-driven model of mobility support that is attentive to where cities actually are in their cultural development journey, rather than where external funders or programme designers assume them to be.

A further instrument worth highlighting in this context is the EU Town Twinning programme, funded through the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values ([CERV](#)) programme. While twinning arrangements are sometimes perceived as a legacy instrument of an earlier era of European integration, they retain a distinctive and underappreciated strength: their accessibility to small towns and peripheral regions that are rarely reached by more competitive or capacity-intensive European cultural programmes. CERV funding makes it possible for municipalities of very different sizes and means to establish and sustain long-term relationships with counterparts in other Member States, creating the kind of durable bilateral trust that larger cooperation frameworks often struggle to build. The cultural dimension of twinning activities varies considerably, and many CERV-supported projects do not have an explicit cultural focus at present – a gap that merits attention from EU institutions. However, where the cultural dimension is activated, the results can be genuinely illuminating. The twinning between Monterosso Grana in Italy and Bar-sur-Loup in France offers a compelling example: the two towns have used their new partnership to reconstruct a [shared history](#) shaped by labour migration and movement between the Grana Valley and the hinterland of the French Riviera,

developing conferences, educational activities and archival publications that bring this common heritage to life.<sup>54</sup> It is precisely this kind of locally rooted, community-centred cultural exchange – modest in scale but meaningful in depth – that deserves greater recognition and encouragement within the European cultural mobility ecosystem.

A second example illustrates how twinning frameworks can mobilise cultural exchange around contemporary social challenges. In June 2022, the city of Marburg, together with Marburg University, organised a CERV-funded Future Lab entitled [‘Sister Cities for Gender Equality’](#) bringing together twin cities from Germany, Slovenia, France, Tunisia and Romania. The lab addressed three interconnected themes – the political representation of women, action against gender-based violence, and gender equality in the cultural sector – combining expert introductions with structured exchanges of good practice between the participating cities. The results were tangible and durable: the project catalysed a fundraising campaign for the establishment of a women’s shelter in Sfax, a professional exchange and training programme on gender-based violence for staff at the Marburg Women’s Shelter, and the development of mentoring schemes for female local politicians. Crucially, the project was embedded from the outset in a cultural framework – Women on Stage for Gender Equality – and since April 2023 has continued to generate regular cultural events, including film series and concerts, keeping the themes alive in public life long after the formal project concluded. It is precisely this kind of locally rooted, community-centred cultural exchange – modest in scale but meaningful in depth – that deserves greater recognition and encouragement within the European cultural mobility ecosystem.

Together, these programmes contribute to fruitful interactions between local, national and European actors – and between European cities and their counterparts across the world.

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54 European Commission, [‘Memorie Migranti: Comunità oltre i confini // Mémoire Migrante: Communautés au-delà des frontières’](#), EU F&T Portal, 2025.

# Artists at risk and forcibly displaced: cities at the heart of geopolitics

Alongside the professional and economic dimensions of cultural mobility, an increasingly pressing concern has emerged at the intersection of culture, human rights and geopolitics: the growing number of artists and cultural professionals facing armed conflicts, persecution, censorship or displacement. This dimension has acquired particular urgency in the context of ongoing crises – from the war in Ukraine to the conflicts in the Middle East, to attacks on the freedom of artistic expression or violence towards minorities – which have dramatically increased both the demand for protection and the difficulty of providing it.

‘Another major trend, linked to international relations, is supporting artists at risk. This is closely tied to culture and democracy, as ongoing crises – such as the war in Ukraine and the situation in the Middle East – have led to an increase in applications, particularly from the Middle East and Africa. This makes the mobility of international artists increasingly difficult due to restrictions. We’ve heard from several German cities that many artists at risk initially seek refuge in other countries before they can enter Germany.’

– Julie Hervé, Head of Culture and Democracy, Eurocities

The particular hardship experienced by artists from the Global South navigating European visa restrictions takes on an additional dimension in the context of artists at risk, for whom delays or refusals may have consequences far beyond professional inconvenience. UCLG’s Culture 21 Actions explicitly addresses this issue, and the Rome Charter’s recognition of the need to protect artists at risk represents a significant step towards embedding this concern within international governance frameworks.

Networks such as the International Cities of Refuge Network (ICORN) exemplify how cities can organise a systemic response to these challenges, offering safe havens to writers, journalists and arts professionals through structured relocation programmes that provide financial support, accommodation, administrative assistance and integration into local cultural ecosystems. **These initiatives aim not only to facilitate relocation but to restore the conditions necessary for artistic practice**, allowing individuals to continue their work, rebuild professional networks and regain international visibility.<sup>55</sup>

Complementary approaches – including temporary relocation schemes and sanctuary-based initiatives such as City of Sanctuary – extend this logic by emphasising wellbeing, resilience and social inclusion. They recognise that mobility, in such contexts, is not an end in itself but a means of sustaining long-term engagement and safeguarding artistic freedom. What emerges from these practices is the importance of a holistic infrastructure of care encompassing material support, professional integration and social inclusion.

At the same time, cities face significant challenges in delivering such support: limited resources, the need for specialised expertise, the difficulty of ensuring sustainable outcomes beyond programme timelines, and – increasingly – the impact of polarised political climates on the reception of displaced cultural professionals. Ethical considerations also arise, particularly regarding the risk of displacing artists from their home contexts and **the longer-term consequences of forced mobility on both individuals and their communities of origin.**

55 See the case study Baltà Portolés, J., ‘Chapter 9: Cities as Safe Havens for At-risk and Displaced Artists’ in Floch, Y. (ed.), *The Situation of At-risk and Displaced Artists and Culture Professionals – Volume 3 Case Studies*, On the Move, 2025.

# Towards a value- and rights-based mobility ecosystem

Taken together, these developments point towards the emergence of a more complex and demanding understanding of cultural mobility – one in which movement is inseparable from questions of rights, protection, equity and human dignity. Cities are being repositioned not only as facilitators of exchange but as guardians of artistic freedom and agents of solidarity within an interconnected yet profoundly unequal global landscape.

This shift requires cities to build what might be called a holistic mobility infrastructure: one that combines material support, professional integration, social inclusion and attention to the informal and relational dimensions of hospitality – trust, belonging and community participation. It also requires a serious reckoning with the asymmetries that structure international cultural exchange, including the visa barriers that restrict the movement of artists from the Global South, the concentration of resources in major metropolitan areas, and the tendency of mobility programmes to prioritise inbound over outbound flows.

Jordi Pascual captures both the ambition and the complexity of this agenda:

*‘Cities have always been shaped by migration and mobility. When policies become solid and long-term, the link between the global and the local must be as clear as possible.’*

– Jordi Pascual, Coordinator, Committee on Culture, UCLG

If cities are to fully realise their potential as key nodes in a European cultural mobility system, several policy directions become apparent. There is a pressing need to reduce administrative barriers through improved coordination across governance levels, particularly in relation to visas, taxation and social protection for mobile cultural professionals. Addressing territorial inequalities

is equally crucial, requiring targeted investment to strengthen the capacity of smaller and less-connected cities to participate meaningfully in international programmes.

A more diversified and balanced approach to mobility support is also necessary – one that ensures short-term initiatives such as residencies are complemented by mechanisms enabling sustained collaboration and career development, and that outbound mobility receives as much strategic attention as inbound hosting. Greater coherence between European, national and local policies would help reduce dependence on project-based funding cycles and enhance the long-term sustainability of mobility frameworks.

Finally, and perhaps most fundamentally, the governance of cultural mobility must become more inclusive. Civil society organisations, artists’ associations and communities are not simply beneficiaries of mobility policies but essential co-producers of the frameworks that shape them.

In an increasingly complex and interconnected world, European cities are not merely passive beneficiaries of cultural mobility policies but active intermediaries shaping the conditions under which artists move, collaborate and create. They are simultaneously cultural programmers and diplomatic actors, talent hubs and places of refuge, innovation platforms and communities of care. But their capacity to fulfil this role depends on the quality of the frameworks that European institutions and Member States put in place. What the emerging landscape of city-led cultural mobility reveals, above all, is that circulation is not simply a logistical question. It is a political question – about who gets to move, on whose terms, with what support, and to what end. The answer to that question is, ultimately, a measure of the kind of Europe we wish to build.

# European Capitals of Cultural Mobility

by Ariane Bieou

The growing support for the mobility of artists and cultural professionals reflects a broader strategic priority for cities across Europe. In many cases, this commitment is rooted in long-term cultural strategies that serve as roadmaps for local cultural development, international engagement and urban attractiveness – and the importance of cultural mobility within these frameworks has grown steadily, shaped by sustained dialogue and cooperation among municipalities seeking to understand and respond to the needs of their cultural sectors.

Today, cultural mobility is increasingly embedded in local cultural strategies, policy frameworks and municipal action plans, confirming its status as a core dimension of urban development agendas. Cities support the mobility of artists and cultural professionals for reasons that are simultaneously strategic and cultural. By enabling local artists and cultural operators to engage internationally, cities strengthen their visibility, attractiveness and international relationships. In this perspective, artists and cultural professionals act as ambassadors for their territory, promoting its identity, creativity and values beyond its borders, expanding professional networks and opening access to new cultural audiences and markets.

Inbound mobility, meanwhile, serves as a driver of innovation through culture. By welcoming artists and cultural practitioners from different countries and cultural contexts, cities introduce new ideas, practices and artistic approaches into their local ecosystems. These exchanges stimulate creativity, encourage experimentation and contribute to the renewal and diversification

of local cultural production. A key advantage of municipal support schemes lies precisely in their proximity to local artists and cultural organisations: compared with national or European programmes, city-level initiatives are often better positioned to identify local needs, build trust-based partnerships and provide tailored support that generates tangible benefits for cultural actors and their communities.

For cities participating in the European Capital of Culture (**ECoC**) programme, cultural mobility serves multiple interconnected objectives. Outbound mobility allows local artists, cultural professionals, organisations and volunteers to engage with international networks, reinforcing the city's visibility and contributing to a form of cultural diplomacy in which its representatives become advocates for its identity and creative life. Inbound mobility, meanwhile, supports innovation by bringing new artistic perspectives, skills and practices into the local ecosystem, stimulating creativity and enhancing the diversity of cultural offerings.

A distinctive feature of **the ECOC programme is its capacity to act as a catalyst for cultural mobility in all its forms**. Rather than treating the European dimension as an additional requirement, the ECOC framework places transnational cooperation at the heart of artistic creation and cultural production. International partnerships, co-productions, residencies, exchanges and collaborative projects are embedded throughout the programme cycle, creating a comprehensive ecosystem of mobility that involves artists, cultural professionals, organisations and audiences alike.

In this sense, ECoC promotes a 360-degree approach to mobility, supporting both the circulation of cultural actors and the exchange of ideas, knowledge and creative practices across borders.

Equally important is the programme's contribution to territorial cohesion within Europe. By frequently taking place in small and medium-sized cities, often located outside major cultural hubs, **the ECoC programme creates new connections between centres and peripheries and strengthens exchanges among peripheral regions themselves.** It broadens access to international opportunities for emerging and mid-career artists, cultural operators and local communities, contributing to the democratisation of cultural mobility and

reinforcing the objective of a more connected, inclusive and culturally integrated Europe.

This article explores the relationship between cultural mobility and the European Capital of Culture framework, examining how mobility schemes contribute to cultural development, international engagement and the long-term legacy of ECoC cities. It does so through three case studies – [Matera 2019](#), [Oulu 2026](#) and [Larnaka 2030](#) – each illustrating a distinct dimension of contemporary cultural mobility practice: connectivity across Europe, environmental sustainability, and social justice at the periphery. The article also examines complementary European cooperation frameworks that are extending the reach and diversity of city-led mobility well beyond the ECoC programme itself.

## ECoC as a catalyst for cultural mobility

The ECoC programme has long functioned as one of the most powerful catalysts for city-level engagement in cultural mobility. Its scale, ambition and European dimension create conditions in which mobility is not simply a supplementary activity but a structural feature of the cultural programme itself. Alongside the designated title-holders, however, a much larger network of cities is engaged in the ECoC process – and it is here that the [Culture Next](#) network plays an increasingly important role.

Culture Next supports ECoC candidate cities and promotes the implementation of ECoC-inspired programmes in cities and regions across Europe. Building on the experiences, partnerships and civic energy mobilised during the bidding process, the network helps all cities – successful or otherwise – to translate the momentum of their candidacy into sustainable, culture-led local development. This matters because over 80% of bidding cities do not win

the ECoC title, yet many of them develop robust cultural strategies, establish mechanisms for cultural planning and citizen engagement, and secure significant budgets for their programmes. Without sustained support, the extraordinary mobilisation of talents, ideas and resources generated by the bid risks being lost once the competition concludes. Culture Next exists to address precisely this challenge, ensuring that the ECoC process generates meaningful and lasting legacy well beyond the title year – and well beyond the cities that win it.

As part of this mission, Culture Next has developed a dedicated mobility programme exclusively available to its full members. It enables cultural professionals to travel to other member cities to observe and learn from specific practices and working methods. Culture Next has also developed an innovative partnership with the [EU-Japan Fest Japan Committee](#), which has supported arts and cultural activities related

to past, present and future European Capitals of Culture since 1992. Over more than three decades, more than 32,000 artists and young people have crossed the bridge between Japan and ECoC cities, developing activities and initiating new collaborations. Since 2026, Culture Next has

extended this relationship by offering cultural professionals from its member cities access to mobility opportunities in Japan – deepening international engagement and opening new pathways for exchange and collaboration well beyond the European continent.

## Three dimensions of cultural mobility practice: case studies

### Matera 2019, Italy: connecting people across Europe

Matera 2019 promoted a participatory and community-based model of cultural production rooted in the principles of cultural citizenship. From the outset, the [international dimension](#) of its planning and design processes was not an add-on but a structuring feature of the programme: cultural mobility became a key driver of international connectivity, linking local communities, artists and institutions across Europe through what its organisers described as a bottom-up, human-centred approach. As Rita Orlando, Director of the Matera Basilicata 2019 Foundation, reflects:

*‘Matera 2019 left behind a network of relationships, skills, and trust. It demonstrated that even from a geographical margin, a centre can emerge capable of attracting energies, visions and collaborations.’*

– Rita Orlando, Director, Matera Basilicata 2019 Foundation

The inbound and outbound cultural mobility supported by Matera 2019 generated intense curiosity on the part of national and international entities, many of which chose to send delegations to explore its methods, exchange ideas and best practices, and develop collaborations on

specific projects. In the other direction, a series of international missions allowed the city to present itself directly to partners abroad, laying the groundwork for joint and more institutional projects. Cultural mobility was thus understood not simply as the physical movement of artists but as the starting point for cooperation, learning and transnational co-creation.

Central to this approach was the Go&See initiative, the first stage of Matera 2019’s Build Up capacity-building programme.<sup>56</sup> Conceived as a mobility seed fund, it provided local artists and cultural operators with a voucher of a symbolic amount – 2,019 euros, a figure deliberately chosen to echo the title year – to support the development of the European dimension of their projects. The concept was deliberately straightforward: beneficiaries were free to use the funding to travel across Europe, discover new artistic and cultural contexts, attend events, meet potential partners and explore opportunities for future collaboration. Rather than supporting the delivery of finished projects, Go&See focused on the earliest and often most critical stage of cooperation: creating the conditions for encounter, networking and trust-building.

<sup>56</sup> The resources related to the Build Up programme of Matera 2019 is currently in an archiving process. Information can be found in the final report Fondazione Matera-Basilicata 2019, [Matera is a Producer of Culture – Matera European Capital of Culture 2019 Monitoring Report](#), second edition 2021.

The impact of the initiative was significant and far-reaching. By enabling direct human-to-human connections, it helped local actors establish lasting relationships with cultural professionals across Europe, many of which evolved into artistic collaborations, co-creation processes and sustainable European partnerships. Go&See also generated a spontaneous second wave of mobility: a Come&Seed initiative emerged organically, through which artists, cultural organisations and potential partners from across Europe were invited to visit Matera, further strengthening relationships and supporting the development of collaborative projects. Together, these outbound and inbound schemes created a virtuous cycle of exchange, fostering European cooperation, expanding touring opportunities and reinforcing connections between cultural actors, organisations and cities. The initiative illustrates how a modest and well-designed investment in mobility can act as a powerful catalyst for international cooperation, capacity building and long-term cultural connectivity.

From 2020 onwards, following the disruption of the COVID-19 period, Matera's legacy phase focused on cultural projects in the remote inland areas of Basilicata. Through the [Creative Communities](#) residency programme, artists were invited to develop work in rural territories rich in intangible heritage. The initiative supported artistic creation, strengthened connections with local communities and generated a renewed form of mobility connecting artists and cultural professionals from outside the region with local creatives and citizens. In 2026, Matera's journey continues: designated as the [Mediterranean Capital of Culture and Dialogue](#), the city is extending its cultural mobility activities across the Mediterranean region, bringing together artists and intellectuals through festivals, residencies and cross-border artistic projects inspired by the legacy of its ECoC year.

## Oulu 2026, Finland: green and sustainable cultural mobility

The experience of Oulu 2026 illustrates how cultural mobility can evolve from a strategic priority into an integral dimension of everyday cultural practice – and how this evolution can be guided by a long-term commitment to environmental sustainability. Henri Turunen, Programme Manager of Oulu 2026, describes this transformation:

*‘ Since the bidding phase, I think it was something that we should do. It takes time to build that connection. But nowadays it's just a natural part of our working. ’*

– Henri Turunen, Programme Manager, Oulu 2026

From the earliest stages of its bid, Oulu progressively expanded its mobility activity from strategic city-led outreach to broader capacity-building initiatives supporting artists and cultural operators. Over time, both inbound and

outbound exchanges have deepened, facilitating knowledge-sharing, professional development and international collaboration, whilst enabling local actors to access and sustain their own international networks and projects. Mobility has become, in Turunen's words, a natural part of daily cultural practice rather than a special initiative.

This evolution has been accompanied throughout by a consistent commitment to environmental sustainability. Oulu 2026 has integrated low-emission event production, experimentation with sustainable solutions and continuous environmental assessment across all phases of its preparation and implementation. This commitment was formalised through the achievement of EcoCompass certification and translated into practical sustainability guidelines that now serve as a reference framework for planning and delivering ECoC activities at all levels.

Oulu's [Guide for Sustainable Events](#) articulates a progressive approach to environmental sustainability, enabling cultural event organisers to improve their practices step by step, from basic actions to more advanced measures, in recognition that greening cultural activities is a continuous learning process requiring gradual adaptation and long-term commitment. Particular emphasis is placed on addressing the environmental impact of travel and transportation – one of the largest sources of carbon emissions in the cultural sector – through carpooling initiatives and the use of a dedicated [carbon calculator](#) that enables organisations to assess travel-related emissions and make more sustainable mobility choices.

The ambition behind these principles found perhaps its most vivid expression in the [E75 Art Bus](#) project: a journey of 11,000 kilometres through eleven countries, carrying nine artists along the E75 highway that connects Northern Europe to the Mediterranean. The project transformed the journey itself into an artistic act, with the road, borders, service stations and

cities becoming part of the artists' material. As Jenni-Juulia Wallinheimo-Heimonen, Artist Professor, disability activist and participant in the project, put it:

*'A border-crossing art bus is in itself a statement in a world where mobility is a privilege for some and a necessity for others.'*

– Jenni-Juulia Wallinheimo-Heimonen, Artist Professor and disability activist, E75 Art Bus

The E75 Art Bus exemplifies a holistic approach to green mobility that goes beyond the choice of transport mode to engage with the deeper meanings of movement, encounter and artistic creation across borders. Cameras recorded continuously, [Instagram](#) stories became extended diaries, and the accumulated materials of the journey – plants, local foods, found objects – became part of the work itself. It is a model of sustainable cultural mobility that is at once environmentally conscious and profoundly human.

## Larnaka 2030, Cyprus: social justice and mobility at the periphery

The experience of Larnaka 2030 raises a set of questions that are becoming increasingly urgent across European cultural policy: how can the growing emphasis on environmental sustainability in cultural mobility be reconciled with the principles of social justice and territorial cohesion? Kelly Diapouli, Artistic Director of Larnaka 2030, articulates the tension directly:

*'I remember ten years ago, when we were advocating for creating bursaries and special support schemes for artists from these remote areas and from places that were not well connected to the centre of the continent. Today, following the recommendations of the Creative Europe programme for a green mobility, this risks disconnecting further these places. Of course, the same applies also for rural areas.'*

– Kelly Diapouli, Artistic Director, Larnaka 2030

The growing emphasis on environmentally sustainable mobility within European cultural programmes reflects a necessary commitment to reducing the environmental impact of international exchanges. However, its implementation may unintentionally create new barriers for communities that are already geographically disadvantaged. For many islands, outermost regions and remote rural areas, air transport remains the only realistic means of international mobility. In such contexts, applying uniform sustainability criteria without considering territorial realities risks further limiting access to mobility opportunities for cultural professionals who already face higher travel costs, longer journey times and weaker connections to major cultural centres.

This challenge raises broader questions about equity within European cultural policies. Cultural mobility should not become a privilege

reserved for actors located in well-connected metropolitan areas. On the contrary, it should contribute to reducing structural inequalities and strengthening the participation of artists and cultural operators from less-connected territories. Several stakeholders have advocated for targeted support mechanisms – dedicated bursaries and mobility schemes for professionals based in remote regions, islands and rural communities – that could help offset the additional costs and constraints associated with geographic isolation.

The debate also highlights the need to reconsider mobility patterns themselves. Cultural mobility is often understood as movement towards major European centres, yet the European project is equally about fostering mutual understanding between diverse territories and cultural realities. Greater attention could therefore be given to exchanges between peripheral regions, encouraging connections between northern, southern, eastern and outermost parts of Europe, rather than reinforcing existing centre-periphery dynamics. Future mobility policies should be designed not only around environmental performance but also around inclusiveness, accessibility and territorial equity, ensuring that all regions of Europe can fully participate in cultural exchange and cooperation.

The [MedSEA](#) project, developed by Larnaka 2030, offers a compelling model for how these principles can be translated into practice. MedSEA – Socially Engaged Arts in the Mediterranean Area – is an international project that uses socially engaged art practices as tools for empowering communities in remote areas of the Mediterranean. Through a month-long residency, twelve emerging artists and cultural professionals of various disciplines are invited to work with local communities in Larnaka, Cyprus and Sfax, Tunisia, creating works that are subsequently presented at the [Mahallart Festival](#) in Larnaka and the [Hors-Lits Festival](#) in Sfax. Each selected artist or cultural professional receives a fee of 3,000 euros for the month-long residency period, in addition to a production budget of 1,500 euros, travel, accommodation, meals, and mentoring and capacity-building support over the course of a year. The programme also ensures reciprocity at the festival level: artists from Larnaka receive travel, accommodation and meals to attend the Hors-Lits Festival in Sfax, whilst artists from Sfax are supported to visit the Mahallart Festival in Larnaka—embedding the exchange within an ongoing bilateral relationship between two artistic communities rather than a single, one-directional residency experience.

## Beyond ECoC: complementary European frameworks for cultural cooperation

The case studies above illustrate the breadth and depth of cultural mobility practice within the ECoC framework. Yet some of the most dynamic innovation in city-led international cultural cooperation is taking place within complementary European programmes that extend this work into new thematic territories and geographic contexts.

The Creative Circular Cities ([CCC](#)) project, funded through the [Interreg Baltic Sea Region programme](#), brings together local authorities, business support organisations and NGOs across six cities in the Baltic Sea region to explore how cultural and creative sectors can play a central role in accelerating the transition from a linear to a circular economy. The project is grounded

in a simple but powerful premise: creativity is a key enabler of circularity. Cultural and creative actors are positioned as both innovators and influencers – artists help businesses develop circular models whilst facilitating the promotion of circular consumption and behaviour to wider audiences. The project has produced methodological guidelines, replicable models and case studies that can support public authorities, business support organisations and civil society actors in designing and scaling circular initiatives. By placing creativity at the heart of environmental transformation, Creative Circular Cities demonstrates how local and interregional cultural cooperation can contribute to systemic change towards more sustainable and resilient communities.

One of the most vivid illustrations of this approach comes from Turku, which organised two Circular Economy Carnivals – festival weeks held in different neighbourhoods, featuring creative and artistic programmes of interventions designed to show residents that circular living is accessible and achievable in everyday life. As Indra Levite, Project Manager of CCC at the [Danish Cultural Institute](#) in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, explains:

*‘The aim of the city members is to raise awareness of the circular economy among city residents and inspire them to adopt more sustainable and mindful consumption habits. Creativity was at the heart of these events. Creative professionals helped design and deliver the programme, contributing their expertise and unique perspectives. Their involvement supported a broader objective: showing local residents that circular living is accessible and achievable in everyday life. So is circularity inspired by creativity? Yes.’*

– Indra Levite, Project Manager CCC, Danish Cultural Institute in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania

Residents were shown practical ways to engage with circular practices – from repairing household items and upcycling clothing to giving new life to broken furniture – whilst the programme even extended to creative initiatives such as music made from plants. The Turku Circular Economy Carnivals illustrate how cultural programming can make abstract sustainability concepts tangible, participatory and locally rooted, drawing on the same principles of community engagement and place-based creativity that characterise the best ECoC mobility programmes.

## Emerging trends: collaboration, sustainability and human connection in the age of AI

Looking beyond the specific programmes examined in this article, several broader trends are reshaping how cities design and implement cultural mobility support schemes – and how they understand the purpose of international cultural exchange itself. Drawing on both the direct experiences of ECoC cities and the wider intelligence gathered through networks such as Eurocities, three major shifts stand out.

The first, identified by Julie Hervé, Head of Culture and Democracy at [Eurocities](#), is the growing integration of culture into broader urban development strategies. A growing number of cities are moving beyond a narrow understanding of cultural mobility as support for individual artistic careers, and are deploying it as **a tool for urban regeneration, the activation of public spaces and the strengthening of community engagement**. In this perspective, cultural mobility

serves a dual function: it enables local cultural actors to learn from innovative practices abroad, whilst simultaneously welcoming international artists whose presence and work can contribute new ideas and approaches to local challenges. Cultural exchange, in other words, is increasingly understood as a form of urban policy – a means of renewing not only artistic practice but the social fabric of cities themselves.

The second trend concerns **the intersection of culture and climate action**. As Hervé observes, the link between cultural mobility and environmental responsibility has become a major policy priority for cities across Europe. Municipalities are actively seeking ways to reduce the environmental impact of cultural activities whilst maintaining the international artistic exchange on which local cultural ecosystems depend. This has opened up renewed and sometimes difficult discussions about sustainable mobility models, greener travel options and innovative ways of supporting cultural cooperation with a lower carbon footprint. The tension between these imperatives is one that cities are navigating in real time, without settled answers. What is clear is that the cultural sector cannot address these questions in isolation: they require coordinated responses across governance levels, adequate financial support and the kind of peer exchange that networks and mobility programmes themselves make possible.

The third trend reflects **the deepening intersection of cultural mobility with democracy and geopolitical solidarity**. Geopolitical crises and ongoing conflicts have reinforced the role of cultural mobility as a tool for international solidarity, and cities are increasingly developing initiatives that support artists at risk or displaced artists from conflict zones, offering opportunities for professional continuity, artistic freedom and international cooperation. In this context, cultural mobility contributes not only to artistic exchange but to the active promotion of democratic values and cultural diversity. This dimension connects directly to the broader

framework of cultural rights articulated by UCLG and others: the freedom to move, create and exchange is not a privilege of the well-connected but a condition of artistic life itself – and defending it, particularly for those most at risk, is one of the most important things that cities can do.

Henri Turunen of Oulu 2026 observes two further trends emerging from lived practice of a city that has navigated the full arc of ECoC engagement. The first is the growing importance of collaboration and resource pooling. In a context of declining national cultural funding across much of Europe, international cooperation is becoming not simply desirable but necessary. **Cities and cultural organisations are increasingly seeking to pool resources, share expertise and develop joint projects**, whilst strengthening their capacity to access European funding through collaborative networks and cross-border partnerships. This shift places new demands on city-level coordination and underlines the value of networks such as Culture Next which provide the peer learning, policy advocacy and practical support that individual municipalities are rarely able to generate on their own.

The second concerns the intersection of cultural mobility and the rapid development of artificial intelligence and new digital ways of working. As cities and cultural organisations seek to understand and adapt to these transformations, cultural mobility is playing an important role in facilitating the exchange of knowledge, skills and experiences across borders. Artists and cultural professionals who have engaged with these questions in different national and institutional contexts bring perspectives that can enrich locally developed responses – and **the human connections forged through mobility provide a foundation of trust and mutual understanding** that is, if anything, more valuable in an environment of rapid technological change. In this sense, cultural mobility is not rendered obsolete by digital transformation; rather, it becomes one of the primary means through which the cultural sector navigates it together.

## Towards a richer, more equitable model of cultural mobility

The case studies and frameworks examined in this article point towards several interconnected conclusions about the current state and future direction of city-led cultural mobility in Europe.

First, mobility is most transformative when it is understood not as an end in itself but as the starting point for deeper and more sustained forms of cooperation. The Go&See initiative in Matera demonstrated that even a modest investment in enabling encounter and trust-building can generate lasting artistic partnerships, touring opportunities and collaborative networks. The most durable impacts of cultural mobility are relational – they cannot be fully captured in programme reports or output metrics, but **they shape the professional trajectories of artists and cultural organisations for years after the formal mobility experience has ended.**

Second, the environmental and social dimensions of mobility are inseparable and must be addressed together. The Oulu experience shows that a serious commitment to sustainability is compatible with ambitious international engagement – but the Larnaka experience reminds us that sustainability frameworks designed without attention to territorial equity risk excluding precisely the communities most in need of international connection. Future policies must be designed to reconcile these imperatives, ensuring that **the transition to greener mobility does not inadvertently reproduce the centre-periphery dynamics it claims to challenge.**

Third, the ECoC framework – powerful as it is – represents only one part of a broader ecosystem of European cultural cooperation. Programmes such as Creative Circular Cities demonstrate that cultural mobility and international exchange are increasingly embedded in policy agendas that go well beyond culture in the traditional sense, connecting the creative sector to the green transition, the circular economy and social innovation. **Cities that engage actively with this broader ecosystem are better positioned to sustain their international cultural ambitions beyond any single programme or title year.**

Finally, what emerges most powerfully from these experiences is the irreducibly human character of cultural mobility. Whether it is the human-to-human encounters fostered by Matera's Go&See initiative, the border-crossing artistic journey of the E75 Art Bus, or the community-embedded residencies of MedSEA in Larnaka and Sfax, the most meaningful forms of international cultural exchange are those that create genuine connections between people, places and practices. In an era of rapid technological change and growing political pressure on the conditions of mobility, this is perhaps the most important argument for continued investment: **cultural mobility, at its best, is an act of solidarity as much as an instrument of policy.**

# Cities' International Cultural Relations: a Global Perspective

by Jordi Baltà Portolés

Cities, and the local governments, authorities and bodies that represent them in the political domain, have long become international actors, developing local diplomacy strategies, establishing twinning agreements and other bilateral partnerships and engaging in regional and global networks and multilateral initiatives. This is visible in all policy areas, including cultural diplomacy and international cultural relations, where recent analyses have observed the emergence of new actors, such as cities and regions, in addition to individuals, international organisations, NGOs, etc.<sup>57</sup>

Several factors drive the engagement of cities and local governments in international relations. In the context of the so-called 'urbanisation of the world', that is the process by which over half of the world's population currently live in urban areas,<sup>58</sup> cities and other local settlements are increasingly recognised as critical places where to address global challenges. Indeed, the 'localisation', or local contextualisation and adaptation, of global

agendas has gained attention in recent years, particularly as a result of efforts towards the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals ([SDGs](#)).<sup>59</sup>

Cities' international cultural relations can be inspired by different rationales, as this chapter will evidence. The 'open', shifting, dynamic nature of cities, as places which have historically developed through exchange,<sup>60</sup> frequently inspires cultural approaches which involve cross-border mobility and interaction, and which aim to explore cultural diversity and elements shared across countries, such as human rights. For instance, it has been observed that it is frequently at the local level where mechanisms to support artists and culture professionals at risk have been established.<sup>61</sup> The ability of cities and local settlements to enable personal encounters can make tensions inevitable but it can also provide the basis for acknowledging others and engaging in active dialogue with them, something to which international mobility processes can contribute.<sup>62</sup>

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57 MacDonal, S.; and Murray, A., [Soft power and cultural relations: A comparative analysis](#), British Council, 2022.

58 UN-Habitat, [World Cities Report 2022: Envisaging the Future of Cities](#), UN-Habitat, 2022.

59 See e.g. Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments, [Towards the Localization of the SDGs: Local and Regional Governments report to the 2025 HLPF. 9<sup>th</sup> Report](#), UCLG, 2025.

60 See e.g. Bauman, Z., '[City of Fears, City of Hopes](#)', working paper, Goldsmiths College, 2003; University of London; Khanna, P., [Connectography: Mapping the Global Network Revolution](#), Lion Publishing, 2016; and Sennett, R., [Building and Dwelling: Ethics for the City](#), Penguin, 2019.

61 Laurence Cuny, quoted in 'L'engagement des villes pour la protection des artistes réfugiés et l'impact sur le rayonnement des expressions culturelles de tous les habitants, notamment des personnes migrantes', chapter 5 in Guèvremont, V.; Cuny, L.; and Otasevic, I. (eds.), [Accéder à soi, accéder à l'autre: Le rôle des villes et des pouvoirs locaux dans la protection et la promotion de la diversité et des droits culturels des personnes migrantes](#). Québec: Université Laval, 2024.

62 Robinson, M., 'Roots, Routes & Rhizomes: Cultural Mobility & Local Communities', in Duxbury, N.; and Vidovic, D. (eds.), [Mobility in Culture: Conceptual Frameworks & Approaches. i-Portunus Houses, Volume 1](#), Kultura Nova Foundation, 2022.

Another trait which often prevails in cities' approaches to mobility and cultural relations is local collaboration. While most of the examples presented in this chapter are led by local governments and other local public bodies, implementation frequently involves an ecosystem of actors – including cultural organisations, universities, civil society organisations, artist residencies, etc. Therefore, while the term 'city' can sometimes be used as a synonym for 'local government', and it is frequently local authorities that undertake a coordinating and/or enabling role, the expertise and resources of other organisations is critical, not least in order to facilitate integration and relevance in local cultural ecosystems.<sup>63</sup> In this respect, the term 'city' should be understood in a broad sense, going beyond the more restrictive, institutional term 'municipality'. As some interviewees consulted during the elaboration of this chapter noted, in a context in which political priorities and funding programmes are subject to change, developing international relations that involve several local actors, build mutual trust and lead to different collaborations (e.g. between theatre companies, higher education institutions, etc.) serves to enhance their sustainability beyond governmental terms.

Finally, it has been suggested that cities' international cultural relations frequently embody an aim to 'engage rather than showcase', embodying collaboration and co-creation

'rather than the showcasing that is traditionally associated with... cultural diplomacy.'<sup>64</sup> Whereas this does not exclude the possibility that some cities' external cultural relations also involve showcasing their identity or cultural productions, and while it could be argued that contemporary approaches to cultural relations adopted by some national cultural institutes also involve active engagement with peers abroad,<sup>65</sup> this distinction should be noted.

Following this introduction, this chapter will first examine the motivations of local governments when developing international cultural relations and supporting mobility and later present a typology of measures that cities can adopt in this field, including local strategies, bilateral cooperation and participation in networks, among others. Complementing other chapters in the publication, the focus here is on developments at the global level, whereas initiatives that have primarily a European focus are not addressed. The chapter closes with observations on factors that can enable cultural mobility at local level, and a short set of conclusions.

The chapter includes evidence collected through desk research and a small number of interviews. The examples provided do not attempt to provide a comprehensive mapping of cities' engagement in international cultural relations, which by far exceeds the scope of the chapter, and are just given for illustrative purposes.

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63 Laurence Cuny in Guèvremont, V.; Cuny, L.; and Otasevic, I. (eds.), [Accéder à soi, accéder à l'autre: Le rôle des villes et des pouvoirs locaux dans la protection et la promotion de la diversité et des droits culturels des personnes migrantes](#). Québec: Université Laval, 2024.

64 Eurocities, *Cities' external cultural relations: trends and actions*, Eurocities, 2017.

65 MacDonald, S.; and Murray, A., [Soft power and cultural relations: A comparative analysis](#), British Council, 2022. Gillespie, M.; O'Loughlin, B.; Nieto McAvoy, E.; and Berneaud-Kötz M., [Cultural Value: Cultural Relations in Societies in Transition: A Literature Review](#), British Council and Goethe-Institut, 2018.

# Cities' objectives in supporting cultural mobility

Several goals and objectives, including the broadening of cultural opportunities and the strengthening of skills for artists and cultural professionals, international prestige, tourism attractiveness and branding, audiences' exposure to international cultural expressions and trends, and cohesion among diverse communities, can inspire cities to develop cultural relations and support both incoming and outgoing cultural mobility.<sup>66</sup>

These motivations may be complementary and coexist within a strategy or programme, even if one of them frequently prevails. Existing literature and evidence suggest that cities' engagement in international cultural relations and mobility support generally are often driven by the following goals:

> **Learning and professional development.**

This can include 'technical exchange' and leadership programmes involving civil servants, policymakers and other agents connected to local government, as well as other forms of mobility supporting learning and capacity-building of independent artists and cultural professionals. In the field of technical exchange, for instance, the Committee on Culture of the global organisation of United Cities and Local Governments ([UCLG](#)), the main international network of local governments, has developed several peer-learning activities addressing cultural policy priorities such as anti-racism in cultural policy; and cultural mediation.<sup>67</sup>

The World Cities Culture Forum ([WCCF](#)), a

network involving over 40 capitals and large cities around the world, has also established a Leadership Exchange Programme, that enables city leaders to take part in online discussions and in-person visits to address policy issues of common interest, including cultural decentralisation, the availability of affordable spaces for artists, and new funding models. This has led to the implementation of new local schemes inspired by these learning experiences.<sup>68</sup> At European level, [Eurocities](#), which involves over 200 large cities from within and outside the EU, regularly identifies cultural policy priorities among its partners, which are later the subject of thematic forums and publications – recent topics of interest have included the design of new spaces for culture and sustainability and inclusion in local cultural policy.<sup>69</sup>

On the other hand, cities can also support cultural mobility to support training and capacity building of artists and culture professionals, both in the early stages of their careers and as continued development. One of the reasons that drove the city of Ramallah to establish twinning agreements or cooperation programmes with partner cities in Europe, for instance, was the obstacles found by higher education institutions in Palestine to invite international trainers. Partnerships have involved collaboration with some European conservatoires and other educational institutions, allowing local arts students to access education abroad and occasionally

66 On the Move and Eurocities, [European Cities and Cultural Mobility: Trends and Support Actions](#). On the Move, Eurocities and Nantes, 2013.

67 Additional details about this and other transcontinental or global networks mentioned in this section are provided in the section on 'Networks' further below. UCLG Committee on Culture, [Peer-learning visit Malmö](#), UCLG, 2022; and UCLG Committee on Culture, [Barcelona: Peer-learning Visit Report](#), UCLG, 2024.

68 World Cities Culture Forum, [The Leadership Exchange Programme in Action. City solutions to global challenges. Impact Report 2018-2023](#), WCCF, 2023.

69 Eurocities, ['Spaces for vibrant cultural and creative scenes'](#), 2 October 2025; and Eurocities (2026), ['100+ initiatives, 60 cities, one commitment: low-carbon and inclusive culture in action'](#), 9 January 2026.

allowing foreign teachers to provide training in Ramallah.<sup>70</sup>

- > **Artistic exchange and enrichment.** As in other types of support for cultural mobility, cities' engagement in this field often aims to enrich local cultural life, including by enabling artists and culture professionals to be hosted locally or to visit residencies, venues and events abroad, supporting co-productions and other joint projects, and providing local audiences with opportunities to access diverse cultural works: 'Mobility creates spaces (or processes) that are different from the norm for both visiting artists – by virtue of taking place 'elsewhere' – and for local people, artists and participants. It brings in lateral perspectives and different ways of doing things as well as practical connections and ideas.'<sup>71</sup> Several of the examples of cooperation projects presented later in this chapter serve to illustrate this.
  
- > **Engagement with human rights and global challenges.** In line with the rising role of cities and local governments as international actors, one of their aims when fostering mobility and developing cultural relations strategies is expressing a commitment to human rights and fundamental freedoms, as well as contributing to debates on other global issues. A clear example of this is cities' provision of safe havens for artists and culture professionals at risk, including those whose security and freedom of expression are threatened in their countries or who have escaped a conflict or crisis.<sup>72</sup> The International Cities of Refuge Network ([ICORN](#)), established in 2006 and which

currently involves over 80 cities across Europe and the Americas, illustrates this approach well, by providing two-year residencies to writers, artists and journalists who are at risk due to their work and professional activities, and enabling them to develop professional networks and opportunities.

Reflecting on the presence of displaced and at-risk artists from a human rights perspective, Laurence Cuny, a lawyer and researcher specialising in cultural rights and artistic freedom, has argued that programmes in this field do not only provide protection but also allow host communities to address global issues such as migration and conflict from a different perspective, enabling complex conversations that may not take place otherwise.<sup>73</sup> In this respect, initiatives in this field can also have a significant social dimension.

Beyond the local implications, participating in international networks also allows local governments' voice to be louder at the international level. The cluster of Cities of Literature within the UNESCO Creative Cities Network ([UCCN](#)), for instance, has adopted an agreement that reaffirms its members' commitment to freedom of expression, reading and creativity as fundamental human rights, emphasising 'the fundamental role of literature as a powerful lever for individual and collective development, contributing to the emergence of an increasingly educated, informed, inclusive, creative and participatory society' and expressing its solidarity to those cities where freedom of expression is

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70 Interview with Sally Abubakr, City of Ramallah, May 2026.

71 Robinson, M., 'Roots, Routes & Rhizomes: Cultural Mobility & Local Communities', in Duxbury, N.; and Vidovic, D. (eds.), *Mobility in Culture: Conceptual Frameworks & Approaches. i-Portunus Houses, Volume 1*, Kultura Nova Foundation, 2022.

72 Baltà Portolés, J., 'Cities as Safe Havens for At-risk and Displaced Artists', in Floch, Y. (ed.), *Protecting and supporting At-risk and Displaced Arts Professionals Across Borders. The Situation of At-risk and Displaced Artists and Culture Professionals - Volume 3 Case Studies*, On the Move, 2025.

73 Laurence Cuny in Guèvremont, V.; Cuny, L.; and Otasevic, I. (eds.), *Accéder à soi, accéder à l'autre: Le rôle des villes et des pouvoirs locaux dans la protection et la promotion de la diversité et des droits culturels des personnes migrantes*, Université Laval, 2024.

threatened or undermined.<sup>74</sup> Some UNESCO Cities of Literature, in collaboration with ICORN, are currently developing a 'Freedom of Expression Toolkit', which is meant to provide guidance to cities willing to address freedom of expression, persecution and repression, through a range of possible activities such as programming at-risk artists, inviting writers to festivals or commissioning work.<sup>75</sup>

Another global issue in which cities have engaged is advocacy for the recognition of culture in the SDGs and future sustainable development agendas – the UCLG Committee on Culture, in particular, has been one of the leading voices in the international civil society campaign Culture 2030 Goal, which calls for a dedicated, standalone [Culture Goal](#). The campaign's most recent document, which presents a draft Culture Goal for the Post-2030 agenda, identifies cultural mobility as one of the issues to be included in this context – more specifically, with a target to 'Enhance legal conditions and practical opportunities for mobility of cultural professionals and cross-border creativity in the creation of cultural goods, services and practices.'<sup>76</sup>

> **Visibility and connectedness.** Partly related to some of the goals described earlier, such as opportunities for cultural enrichment, supporting international cultural exchanges can also be a way to enhance the visibility of local cultural activities, attracting international audiences and generating opportunities for professional networking. A recent analysis of the role of arts festivals in local cultural policy, for instance, underlines that, particularly when festivals invite high-profile artists, this can serve not only to attract tourism but also to raise the profile of local cultural activities and heritage at the international level, and generate opportunities for local cultural actors to be better connected internationally.<sup>77</sup> The contribution of international cultural exchange to raising cultural organisations' profile at home and abroad has been noted elsewhere.<sup>78</sup>

This set of motivations inspires the specific policies, programmes and schemes adopted by cities and local governments in the field of international cultural relations and mobility support, which will be examined in the next section.<sup>79</sup>

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74 UNESCO Cities of Literature, '[Community Agreement, UNESCO Cities of Literature](#)', 17 October 2025.

75 Interview with Joakim Albretkton, Göteborg City of Literature; and Hannah Trevarthen, Nottingham City of Literature, May 2026.

76 Culture 2030 Goal campaign, '[The Culture Goal, from Necessity to Reality](#)', Culture 2030 Goal campaign, 2025.

77 Polivtseva, E., '[Festivals in Context: The Role of the Arts in Local Cultural Policy](#)', European Festivals Association, 2025.

78 DutchCulture, '[The impact of international cultural cooperation: Beyond the borders, beyond the figures](#)', DutchCulture, 2025.

79 While not a motivation or a goal as such, policies supporting international mobility can also have an economic impact at local level. See e.g. the report commissioned by the City of Amsterdam to DutchCulture (2005) on the economic impact of international cultural cooperation for the Netherlands and Amsterdam, covered in another chapter of this publication.

# How cities support cultural mobility: a typology of measures

Cities' engagement in international cultural relations and support for cultural mobility takes a diverse set of forms, ranging from 'unilateral' policies, strategies and programmes, through

'bilateral' partnerships and collaborative arrangements, to engagement in 'multilateral' networks. This section examines these forms, providing some examples of each.

## Local strategies and policies

Understanding that local cultural life is inescapable from international cultural trends and expressions, and that cultural actors, facilities and activities are significant assets in a city's international profile and exposure, many local strategies and policies address the nexus between culture and international relations and can provide a framework for incoming or outgoing mobility.

Initiatives in this field can take several forms, such as the inclusion of international goals in local cultural policies or in development strategies for specific cultural and creative sectors, as well as the inclusion of cultural chapters in cities' international strategies. A survey of 13 cities conducted by Eurocities in 2017 found that none had a separate strategy for their external cultural relations, but several included international relations in their cultural strategies and/or cultural aspects in their international relations strategies.<sup>80</sup> Based on the information collected while preparing this chapter, this may be the case still today, both in Europe and at global level.

Examples in broad cultural strategies integrating international aspects include the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region's Blueprint for Arts and Culture and Creative Industries Development,

which presents a vision for Hong Kong to become an 'East-meets-West centre for international cultural exchange', leveraging 'our cultural characteristics which are rooted in Chinese culture and embracing Western culture to enhance international cultural exchange and promote people-to-people bonds...'.<sup>81</sup> Two of the four strategic directions that structure the Blueprint have a clear international dimension, including 'Develop Diverse Arts and Culture Industries with International Perspective' (with measures including export support and the strengthening of Hong Kong as a 'capital of pop culture') and 'Establish International Platforms to Foster East-meets-West Arts and Cultural Exchange' (including attracting and capitalising on large-scale cultural events, fostering collaborations and co-productions, supporting the participation of local artists in international events and fostering their engagement in networks).<sup>82</sup>

Meanwhile, Amsterdam's Plan for the Arts 2025-2028 includes the aim to '[attract] artists, institutions and cultural professionals from across the world', support the international engagement of local cultural organisations and connect international perspectives with local developments, including by 'providing space for stories from other parts of the world, such as the

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<sup>80</sup> Eurocities, *Cities' external cultural relations: trends and actions*, Eurocities, 2017.

<sup>81</sup> Hong Kong SAR's Culture, Sports and Tourism Bureau, *Blueprint for Arts and Culture and Creative Industries Development*, Hong Kong SAR Government, 2024.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

cities and regions where Amsterdam's residents originate from.<sup>83</sup> The Plan also underlines the aim to partner with the Dutch government, through the ministries of Culture, Education and Science, and of Foreign Affairs, as well as with national culture funds, to engage in international cultural policy, thus illustrating a 'multi-level' approach, that connects national and local authorities. In Barcelona, the latest strategy for the network of 'creative factories', a set of facilities supporting arts creation and production, includes the aim to support their participation in international projects and processes, through dedicated funds provided by the local government.<sup>84</sup>

It is important to note that strategies in this field are not the sole precinct of large cities and metropolises. Terrassa, a city of approximately 230,000 inhabitants in the vicinity of Barcelona, has developed several international relations strategies that include culture and heritage as relevant priorities.<sup>85</sup> It is a member of several international networks and actively participates in Eurocities, the UCLG Committee on Culture and the UCCN, as a Creative City of Film.

## Local programmes and initiatives supporting and enabling mobility

At a more operational level, several cities have established mechanisms to support incoming or outgoing cultural mobility, through funding and other relevant schemes. Action in this field can take a variety of forms, including the following:

> **Funding schemes**, including mobility grants and support for the development of projects with an international dimension. The [City and Metropolitan Region of Nantes](#), for instance, manages a wide range of [schemes](#) supporting incoming and outgoing mobility, some of which result from partnerships with [Institut français](#) and with foreign partners such as the Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec ([CALQ](#)) and the City of Recife, Brazil. A study conducted by On the Move found that 97 international mobility projects had been supported by Nantes between 2019 and 2023, with 326 beneficiaries in total. Around 38% of the mobility projects involved a residency

project in a foreign country, and another 38% concerned the dissemination of a project or international touring. The remaining projects varied in nature, ranging from creation, research and collaboration to the organisation of workshops and trainings.<sup>86</sup>

Meanwhile, the Federal District of Brasília established in 2016 the [Conexão Cultura](#) programme, which aims to strengthen the skills of cultural professionals, equipping them to find new opportunities while also contributing to the national and international dissemination of cultural productions from Brasília.<sup>87</sup> In this context, support has been provided both for artists and culture professionals from Brasília to attend major international events in Brazil and abroad (e.g. the [Atlantic Music Expo](#) in Praia, Cabo Verde; [Midem](#) in Cannes; and the [Berlinale](#)) or to take part in residencies, and for foreign

83 City of Amsterdam, [Many stories make the city: Executive Summary, Plan for the Arts 2025-2028](#), City of Amsterdam, 2024.

84 Regidoria de Cultura i Indústries Creatives i Institut de Cultura de Barcelona, [Mesura de govern de Fàbriques de Creació de Barcelona](#), Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2025.

85 See e.g. Ajuntament de Terrassa, [Pla Director d'Internacionalització i Diplomàcia Municipal](#), Ajuntament de Terrassa, 2021.

86 On the Move, [International experiences of cultural mobility, supported by Nantes Métropole and the City of Nantes \(2019-2023\): Analysis and recommendations](#), On the Move and Nantes Métropole, 2024.

87 Rossiter Lima Costa, M., '[Conexão Cultura DF: uma revisão das políticas públicas para a cultura no Brasil e no Distrito Federal](#)', *Revista Data Venia*, 16(1), 2024; and Lewis, E., 'Conexão Cultura DF (Culture Connection DF)', UCLG Good Practices Obs, 2020.

professionals to visit Brasilia and become familiar with the local cultural context.

> **Support for cultural organisations and residencies facilitating cultural mobility.**

In addition to launching public calls to support mobility projects, local governments frequently support cultural organisations and venues engaged in international mobility. An example of this is [Center Rog](#), a public non-profit creative hub co-funded by the City of Ljubljana. Based in an old factory in the city centre of Ljubljana, it includes nine production labs and five residential studios and is recognised both for its contribution to innovative creative practices connecting crafts and technology and for its social and participatory work, including educational activities and community engagement in governance. With the aim of building a strong international community of creative individuals and organisations, Center Rog issues an annual international call for partnerships and has taken part in several EU-funded projects.<sup>88</sup>

> **Schemes contributing to the resettlement of at-risk or forcibly displaced artists,**

including measures to facilitate the continuation of their professional work and integration in the cultural ecosystem of their cities of arrival. A good example of this is the [INTRO programme](#) established by the Ministry of Culture and Media of the City of Hamburg, which connects public and independent cultural organisations with artists and culture professionals who have arrived in Hamburg as a result of being at risk or displaced from their countries. The scheme supports collaborative projects that may contribute to increasing

diversity-awareness in host organisations, provide employment opportunities for artists and culture professionals and foster innovative approaches (e.g. curation of programmes or exhibitions, design and implementation of an event series, etc.). Complementing these activities, beneficiary artists and culture professionals receive consultation and advice to facilitate their integration in the local cultural sector and can take part in events such as the [International Artist Meet Up Hamburg](#), which provides networking and training opportunities on legal and administrative aspects related to mobility and relocation.

> **Information services supporting mobility.**

The availability of information on funding opportunities to engage in cultural mobility, as well as on legal and administrative matters related to international exchange (e.g. taxation, social security, visas, etc.), is a critical issue to facilitate mobility, as the experience of On the Move attests. Some local governments play an important role in this field, by providing specialised information in their own channels or by establishing dedicated services. Loja Lisboa Cultura, for instance, is an information service established by the City of Lisbon to facilitate advice and training to artists and culture professionals, in areas including cultural mobility. It is also the Portuguese member of the international network of Mobility Information Points ([MIPs](#)) initiated by On the Move. Some other MIPs also receive funding from local governments and bodies, including Slovene MIP [Motovila](#), which is supported by the City of Ljubljana, and German MIP [Touring Artists](#), which receives supports from the Berlin Senate.

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<sup>88</sup> Eurocities, [Culture for sustainable and inclusive cities: 100+ initiatives from European cities implementing the Eurocities Lille Call to Action](#). Eurocities and Ville de Lille, 2025; and Zamida, R., [Center Rog Creative Hub – The revitalization of a former factory](#), UCLG Good Practices Obs, 2022.

## Bilateral cooperation

As in other areas of international cooperation, cities' international cultural relations can involve bilateral partnerships and similar collaborations with peers. Some specific forms of bilateral cooperation involving local governments exist, such as twinning arrangements and decentralised cooperation. Cities and local governments can also engage in bilateral collaborations with organisations that are not local governments or authorities, but which contribute to local cultural life, such as local cultural organisations, NGOs, artist collectives, etc.

Work in this field includes so-called 'decentralised cooperation', a term used particularly in Francophone contexts to describe international cooperation involving local governments and communities, and characterised by peer-to-peer exchanges. In addition to local governments (and associations of local governments), decentralised cooperation frequently involves NGOs, universities, individual citizens and other local stakeholders.<sup>89</sup>

One frequent aim of decentralised cooperation is strengthening the technical and policy-related capacities of local governments and other partners in the Global South. An example of this is the collaboration between the City of Brazzaville, in the Republic of the Congo, and the International Association of Francophone Mayors ([AIMF](#)), with a view to strengthening cultural life and facilitating social integration and residents' well-being in the area of [Poto-Poto](#), through the renovation of a heritage building to host a new cultural venue and related activities. The project has involved local partners and the provision of technical assistance by [Culture et développement](#), a French NGO that has for

many years supported decentralised cooperation connecting France and several countries in Africa and elsewhere.

Probably the most extensive and traditional form of bilateral cooperation involving cities is town twinning, which may be understood as 'a formal agreement, unlimited in time, between at least two sub-national governments who commit to developing joint activities involving their communities.'<sup>90</sup> Town twinning gained importance particularly in the decades after the Second World War in Europe, as a way to foster cross-border encounters and understanding, including cultural exchanges, often in the form of traditional cultural presentations and events, as a central element. It subsequently expanded to relations with other world regions.

While town twinning may be less significant now, a survey of local and regional governments and local and regional government associations conducted in 2023 by the European Council of Municipalities and Regions ([CEMR](#)), the European section of UCLG, found that 67% of all respondents had been involved in some form of twinning over the previous two years. France and Germany were by far the countries with a higher number of twinning commitments, illustrating well the origins of town twinning and their continued reach, followed far behind by Poland and Serbia. Other countries with cities active in this field, though with a much lower number of responses, included Georgia, Sweden, Spain, Finland and Lithuania.<sup>91</sup> Overall, almost 50% of respondents indicated that the primary purpose of their twinning activities was to establish cultural connections (which should be interpreted in a broad sense, rather than necessarily involving artistic exchange or

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89 Pougnaud, P., [Guide opérationnel de la coopération décentralisée](#), Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères, 2020; and Baltà, J.; Guibert, A.; and Marcolin, V., [Culture and Creativity for the Future of Cities: Theories, Practices and Methodologies from African, Asian and Latin American Countries](#), Publications Office of the European Union, 2021.

90 Furlan, V.; Revault, M.; and Madureira Teles, L., [Analysis of Twinning in Europe: Charting the Twinning of Tomorrow](#). European Council of Municipalities and Regions (CEMR), 2023.

91 Ibid.

support for the mobility of artists and culture professionals), whereas over half of respondents reported a ‘hands-on’ use of twinning aimed at developing sustainable networks, through workshops, conferences, training activities and other joint projects.<sup>92</sup>

More explicit goals related to cultural mobility can often be found in the town twinning arrangements and other bilateral programmes of larger cities. For instance, the analysis of how the City and Metropolitan Region of Nantes engages in cultural mobility, mentioned earlier, describes existing twinning and cooperation schemes involving Recife, Brazil; Quebec, Canada; Hamburg, Japan; Rufisque, Senegal; Seattle, USA; Cluj-Napoca, Romania; Tbilisi, Georgia; Saarbrücken, Germany; and Cardiff, Wales.<sup>93</sup>

Meanwhile, Ramallah has developed several long-term collaborations with European cities as a way to enable the exchange of skills and experience between Palestinian and foreign artists and culture professionals, enable Palestinian artists to perform for international audiences and gain new experience, and keep Palestinian art visible on international platforms, as a political act and part of national affirmation. Inviting artists from abroad also contributes to local audiences’ awareness of international cultural trends. Collaborations involving incoming and/or outgoing mobility have been established with cities and local governments, including Bordeaux,

Toulouse and Trondheim, as well as with cultural organisations, including [Forevergreen](#) (Italy), the Helsinki International Artist Programme ([HIAP](#)), the [Public Art Lab](#) in Berlin and the [Ujazdowski Castle Centre for Contemporary Art](#) in Warsaw. In recent years, the city has also sought to invite cities from other Arab countries to its international events, thus building both cross-regional and inter-regional collaborations. Ramallah’s participation in several international networks, including UCLG and the UCCN (as a Creative City of Music) has also provided a setting for identifying relevant collaborations.<sup>94</sup>

Indeed, bilateral cooperation activities exist in all world regions and operate in multiple directions, rather than an exclusive North-South or South-North focus. The activity report 2020-2025 produced by the Directorate-General on Culture of the Province of Canelones, Uruguay, describes how, after Uruguay stopped being a recipient country of Official Development Assistance ([ODA](#)), or international aid, in 2018, public authorities have needed to develop their own international cooperation initiatives. In 2022, Canelones signed a cooperation agreement with the City of Sao Leopoldo, Brazil, which enabled an artist exchange involving several cities from the province of Canelones and their Brazilian partner. Another partnership with the City of Quilmes, Argentina, has been the basis for technical exchange in several areas, including library cooperation.<sup>95</sup>

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92 Ibid.

93 On the Move, [International experiences of cultural mobility, supported by Nantes Métropole and the City of Nantes \(2019-2023\): Analysis and recommendations](#), On the Move and Nantes Métropole, 2024.

94 Interview with Sally Abubakr, City of Ramallah, May 2026.

95 Urbanavicius, D., [Canelones: Tierra de cultura, tierra de culturas. Relatoría sobre el proceso de gestión de la Dirección General de Cultura del Gobierno de Canelones, período 2020-2025](#), Dirección General de Cultura del Gobierno de Canelones & RGC, 2025.

## Temporary cooperation projects

Some cooperation projects involving cities have a temporary nature, either because they result from agreements with a specific timeline or because of the funding that supports them. A clear example of this includes projects funded by EU programmes and initiatives such as [Creative Europe](#), [Interreg](#) or [URBACT](#) – the latter two identifying cooperation among public authorities and other public bodies as a key priority.

In addition to facilitating the international mobility of local government personnel, artists and other cultural professionals, these initiatives contribute to the transfer of knowledge and expertise. As suggested by an analysis of the Cultural and Creative Spaces and Cities ([CCSC](#)) project, initiatives like this can ‘function as soft governance tools; they mobilise grassroots actors, [and] enable trans local cooperation...’<sup>96</sup> In the case of CCSC, a project funded by Creative Europe between 2018 and 2021, the notion of ‘trans local cooperation’ was justified by the involvement of European networks and organisations (including [Trans Europe Halles](#), as coordinator, and the [European Cultural Foundation](#)) as well as several public authorities or bodies connected to public authorities (e.g. [Region Skåne](#); [City of Lund](#); [Creative Industry Košice](#); [Kaapeli](#), Helsinki) and other partners operating locally. The project involved seven Urban Labs and produced several research publications and policy recommendations.

## Transcontinental or global networks

As in other areas of international cooperation, cities and local governments engage in different types of networks as part of their international cultural relations. Previous sections have already shown how participation in networks such as

Artist mobility is not frequently a central goal in temporary cooperation projects involving local governments, but some examples of this exist. [CreArt 3.0](#), for instance, is the third iteration of an EU-funded project first launched in 2012, that aims to support the mobility of artists, curators and cultural agents. Led by Valladolid, Spain, it currently involves 13 mid-sized cities, as well as some associations, in 12 member states of the EU and neighbouring countries. The third phase of the project, implemented between 2024 and 2026, plans to organise 45 residencies for artists in 15 European cities, as well as 39 public events, among other activities.

Finally, programmes like URBACT allow local governments to exchange expertise in urban policies, and have often supported exchanges addressing the cultural field. For instance, local and regional government representatives, music teachers and NGOs interested in the nexus of music and social inclusion from seven European cities took part in an exchange activity in L’Hospitalet de Llobregat, Catalonia, Spain, to discuss approaches in this field and become familiar with the methodologies of the host [Municipal Music School and Arts Centre](#). Similarly, the Greater Manchester Arts Sustainability Team ([GMAST](#)) was identified as a good practice in how the arts and culture can drive climate activism, and was the central experience in a thematic network involving five other European cities.<sup>97</sup>

UCLG, Eurocities, WCCF or the UCCN can enable involvement in learning activities, strengthen international relations strategies and provide the basis for subsequent bilateral exchanges and cooperation projects.

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<sup>96</sup> Nehl, M., ‘[Infrastructuring cultural policy: the case of Creative Europe’s ‘Cultural and Creative Spaces and Cities’](#), *European Journal of Cultural Management and Policy*, 16:15478, 2026.

<sup>97</sup> URBACT, [Good practice transfer: Why not in my city?](#), URBACT, 2021.

This section presents some of the most visible networks in the field of cities' cultural relations active at transcontinental or global level. It includes networks that have a remit covering different policy areas and those that specialise in cultural policies or in specific cultural sectors. The list does not attempt to provide a comprehensive mapping but to identify some major stakeholders and present their main defining traits, particularly as regards cultural mobility.

## UCLG

UCLG, the global network of United Cities and Local Governments, was established in 2004, building on the legacy of the international municipal movement which emerged in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. It currently involves over 250,000 towns, cities, regions and metropolises and over 175 associations of local and regional governments in 140 countries.<sup>98</sup> In addition to facilitating policy exchange, UCLG has an important role in representing the voice of cities and local governments at the United Nations and in other international forums.

The UCLG Committee on Culture, also established in 2004, provides a set of frameworks and guidelines to connect local cultural policies with sustainable development, with a strong emphasis on global agendas, cooperation and peer-learning. Its founding document, the Agenda 21 for culture, affirmed that 'International cultural cooperation is an indispensable tool for the constitution of a supportive human community which promotes the free circulation of artists and cultural operators, especially across the

north-south frontier, as an essential contribution to dialogue between peoples to overcome the imbalances brought about by colonialism and for interregional integration.'<sup>99</sup> Over 1,000 local governments, international networks, universities and civil society organisations have adhered to the Agenda 21 for culture since it was signed.<sup>100</sup>

The Committee on Culture's most recent framework for policy action, entitled Culture 21 Plus, calls local and regional governments to promote national and international cooperation through, among other things, the implementation of support mechanisms for the international mobility of local artists and cultural professionals, and the provision of support to artists and culture professionals who are at risk or persecuted.<sup>101</sup>

The organisation promotes peer-learning events connecting local decision-makers, staff and civil society organisations, operating in multiple directions, on the understanding that cities frequently face common challenges. As a result, a peer-learning visit to Buenos Aires may involve representatives from Lisbon, whereas a learning activity in Izmir can involve several cities from across Europe.<sup>102</sup> UCLG also convenes biennial Culture Summits, enabling debates and good practice experiences on culture and sustainability, connecting cities, international organisations and civil society organisations. Other activities include a biennial award recognising good practices in local cultural policy, cultural rights and sustainability, and active engagement in the Culture 2030 Goal campaign for a standalone goal on culture in future sustainability agendas.

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98 UCLG, [#UCLGMeets: Welcome to the Centenary Movement of Local and Regional Governments. Basic Guide for active participation in UCLG's governing bodies](#), UCLG, 2022.

99 IV Porto Alegre Forum of Local Authorities for Social Inclusion, [Agenda 21 for culture: An undertaking by cities and local governments for cultural development](#), UCLG, 2004.

100 UCLG, [List of cities, local governments and organisations](#), UCLG, 2025.

101 UCLG, [C21Plus Extended: The Guide on Cultural Rights in Sustainable Cities and Communities](#), UCLG, 2025. A summarised, non-comprehensive version of the document is available [here](#).

102 UCLG Committee on Culture, [Peer-learning: Lisboa / Buenos Aires](#), UCLG, 2017; and UCLG Committee on Culture, [Peer-learning: Izmir](#), UCLG, 2018.

## UCCN

The UNESCO Creative Cities Network ([UCCN](#)) was created in 2004 to promote cooperation with and among cities that have identified creativity as a strategic factor for sustainable urban development. It currently gathers 408 cities around the world, with the common objective of placing creativity and cultural industries at the heart of their development plans at the local level and cooperating actively at the international level. UCCN's areas of action include professional and artistic exchange programmes and networks, related to different cultural and creative sectors – in particular, UCCN has identified 8 creative fields (architecture; crafts and folk art; design; film; gastronomy; literature; media arts; and music), and each candidate city indicates, in its application to join UCCN, the creative field in which it intends to become a member.<sup>103</sup>

An evaluation of the UCCN conducted in 2024 suggested that the exchange of knowledge and the increased mobility of creators and professionals across cities was the most important result of the network, with over 60% of local focal points arguing that they had observed impacts in this area. In parallel, the analysis of member cities' monitoring reports showed that exchanges between creators and professionals across cities were frequent and highly appreciated. These activities were frequently connected to local events (e.g. film festivals, craft fairs, design weeks, gastronomy events), many of which preceded cities' designation as a Creative City, although membership of UCCN contributed to raising their profile and facilitated international recognition and participation.

Some of UCCN's thematic clusters, such as those in literature, media arts and design, have established residence programmes allowing artists and culture professionals opportunities to discover peer cities.<sup>104</sup> The network also provides opportunities for mid-sized and large cities to learn from one another and to strengthen their voices at the international level.<sup>105</sup> While the UCCN has a global scope and enables connections in multiple directions, evaluations have also noted that relationships 'are geographically unbalanced with a bias towards the Global North, accentuating membership disparities.'<sup>106</sup>

As previous sections in this chapter have shown, participation in UCCN can provide the basis for subsequent bilateral collaborations, as in the case of Ramallah, as well as for the design of specific projects among committed cities, as in the case of Cities of Literature engaged with freedom of expression. Other initiatives developed by Cities of Literature include a programme of [virtual writers-in-residence](#) organised by Melbourne City of Literature, in collaboration with other Cities of Literature;<sup>107</sup> the [Story Valley project](#), funded by Erasmus+, which connected four European cities with a view to developing students' literacy and language skills through telling stories in fun, creative ways; a youth [letter-writing project](#) connecting youth writers across Cities of Literature; and [Closer Together](#), a project connecting six Cities of Literature in Ukraine, Lithuania, Poland and Sweden in the context of the war in Ukraine, aiming to highlight Ukraine's literary voices and experiences, fostering the mobility of writers and translators, and using literature as a tool for dialogue and democratic exchange.

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<sup>103</sup> UNESCO, '[UNESCO Creative Cities Network: Call for Applications 2025. Application guidelines](#)', UNESCO, 2025.

<sup>104</sup> Pérez, A.; Al Bakhit, N.; and Rodríguez Temiño, I., '[UNESCO Creative Cities Network \(UCCN\) Evaluation](#)', UNESCO, 2024.

<sup>105</sup> Lewis, R.; and Affonso Ivo Franco, P., '[International Cultural Relations to Fulfil the UN Sustainable Development Goals: Challenges, Opportunities and Initiatives](#)', ifa, 2025.

<sup>106</sup> Pérez, A.; Al Bakhit, N.; and Rodríguez Temiño, I., '[UNESCO Creative Cities Network \(UCCN\) Evaluation](#)', UNESCO, 2024.

<sup>107</sup> Interviews with Joakim Albrettsen, Göteborg City of Literature, and Hannah Trevarthen, Nottingham City of Literature, May 2026.

## WCCF

The World Cities Culture Forum (WCCF) was established in 2012 around the belief that global cities can achieve more by working together and being generous with ideas. It was founded and is chaired by Justine Simons OBE, London's Deputy Mayor for Culture and the Creative Industries. The WCCF brings together over 40 global cities. It organises an annual [World Cities Culture Forum](#), in a different city each year, convening leaders from across the network and providing a space for inspiration, visibility and soft power. The network also publishes regular reports and studies, presenting good practices from its member cities and exploring issues of common interest.

While international mobility of artists and culture professionals is not a core concern, the WCCF has established a [Leadership Exchange Programme](#), as described earlier in this chapter, which in its two initial rounds has delivered 11 exchanges, involving 22 cities and more than 185 participants. The programme allows city leaders to visit another city and spend a few days with their peers, delving into a cultural policy topic and learning how different cities are approaching it. There is evidence of how some of these exchanges have subsequently informed policy change in participating cities – for instance, New York's [NYC Create in Place](#) initiative, launched in 2024 to address the affordability crisis threatening cultural and creative sectors, and which aims to safeguard and strengthen local creative infrastructure, grew out of a visit to London, where delegates learnt about London's Culture and Creative Spaces at Risk office. Likewise, Buenos Aires' Barrios Creativos programme, which aims to support access to culture, provide visibility to neighbourhood identity and boost citizens' pride, was inspired by lessons learned through London's Borough of Culture award and other elements from the Leadership Exchange Programme.<sup>108</sup>

## ICORN

The International Cities of Refuge Network ([ICORN](#)) was established in 2006, building on the experience of the International Cities of Asylum Network (INCA), established in the mid-1990s by the International Parliament of Writers, to allow persecuted writers and journalists to be safely hosted in cities, thus symbolising the role of cities as spaces of protection. ICORN currently involves over 80 cities across Europe and the Americas, which offer protective residencies to writers, journalists and artists at risk. Each city runs the ICORN programme independently, in cooperation with, and with support from, the ICORN Secretariat, based in Stavanger, Norway.<sup>109</sup>

ICORN provides temporary, but long-term, relocation (two years, in most cases), and emphasises that it is not an urgent response organisation and does not offer emergency residencies. Hosting cities provide accommodation for the resident and, where applicable, their family; a scholarship or grant for the period of the residency; access to public services in the country and city of residence; travel expenses related to relocation; and fees for visas, passports and other necessary documentation. The host city also supports the development of professional networks and opportunities during the residency.

ICORN can host approximately 20 people at risk per year, a figure which is far lower than the number of applications it receives. Selection criteria include the severity and vulnerability of cases received, the ability to cross-check the evidence provided, geographic and gender balance, and the ability to find cities that are able to host applicants.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> World Cities Culture Forum, [World Cities Culture Report 5<sup>th</sup> Edition](#), WCCF, 2025.

<sup>109</sup> Shuddhashar, '[Helge Lunde talks to Shuddhashar about exile and why it is always by definition about loss, suffering, uprootedness](#)', Shuddhashar, 3 December 2028.

<sup>110</sup> Baltà Portolés, J., 'Cities as Safe Havens for At-risk and Displaced Artists', in Floch, Y. (ed.), [Protecting and supporting At-risk and Displaced Arts Professionals Across Borders. The Situation of At-risk and Displaced Artists and Culture Professionals – Volume 3 Case Studies](#), On the Move, 2025.

## Other networks

This chapter cannot present a comprehensive mapping of all relevant networks connecting cities and local governments in the context of their international cultural relations. However, in addition to those that have been presented earlier, some others can be briefly mentioned.

They include some networks with a regional, linguistic or historical connection, such as the following:

- the Union of Ibero-American Capital Cities (**UCCI**), which gathers 29 capital and major cities in Latin America, Andorra, Portugal and Spain and which, in the cultural field, organises the annual **Iberoamerican Capital of Culture Programme**;
- the International Association of Francophone Mayors (AIMF), which involves 350 cities, metropolitan areas and local authority associations from 57 Francophone countries; in the cultural field it engages, for instance, in the provision of capacity-building of countries in the Global South, with particular emphasis on cultural heritage;<sup>111</sup>
- the Commonwealth Local Government Forum (**CLGF**) involves more than 200 local government associations, councils and ministries with responsibility for local government in 47 countries belonging to the Commonwealth;
- the Union of Portuguese-speaking Capital Cities (**UCCLA**) currently gathers 78 capital and major cities across Portuguese-speaking countries in four continents; and
- **Mercociudades**, which gathers 400 cities and provinces from across 12 Latin American countries, and which has a very active **Thematic Unit on culture**, established in 1995. Among its projects, the network is currently developing an Inventory of Human Mobility and Culture (**RIMC**), which aims to give visibility to heritage and cultural expressions connected to migration, diaspora and collaborations. It has initially been piloted in five cities across Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay.

Finally, there are some examples of networks and groupings of cities and/or local actors engaged in specific areas of the arts and culture, such as the Music Cities Network (**MCN**), which connects 15 cities interested in designing hands-on solutions to bridge the gaps between all music stakeholders in a city. MCN does this, among other things, through connecting, sharing and providing knowledge, and provides a setting from where smaller-scale projects can emerge – a case in point being how Aarhus and Berlin launched an independent artist exchange between their respective festivals after initial contacts made in the context of MCN.<sup>112</sup>

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111 For additional details about the AIMF's work in the field of culture and heritage, see [here](#).

112 Music Cities Network, '[Fostering Independent Artist Exchange through City-to-City Connection](#)', Music Cities Network, 2025.

## Some enabling factors

Previous sections have illustrated how cities and local governments can engage in cultural mobility, either by participating in exchanges themselves, providing direct support for the mobility of artists and culture professionals (through dedicated funding, for instance) or generating an enabling environment to facilitate international mobility (through participation in international networks, the organisation of events, the provision of information or investment in infrastructures that can subsequently provide a basis for international exchanges). What are some of the underlying factors and aspects that can enable mobility from the perspective of cities? This section examines them.

First of all, since an international dimension is intrinsic to any cultural field, cities can enable mobility when they **integrate international aspects in any cultural policy and strategy, as well as in structural programmes**. This can involve, for instance, the inclusion of international sections or measures related to mobility in strategies for the development of individual cultural sectors, the integration of opportunities for international exchange in different funding calls, and the consideration of cultural aspects in cities and local governments' international relations strategies or in applications for funding at EU or other international levels.

Secondly, cities' engagement in international cultural relations and facilitation of cultural mobility can be facilitated by the existence of **multi-level cooperative arrangements** – that is, frameworks whereby national and/or regional authorities support and collaborate with cities and local governments in their international endeavours.<sup>113</sup>

Examples of this include the [Institut français' partnerships](#) with local and regional governments in France to support international cooperation activities, which involve, among other things, funding calls to support international projects by independent artists and cultural organisations, involving incoming and outgoing mobility. An interesting element here is that partnerships are negotiated and tailored to respond to cities' specific interests, and this leads to specific thematic, geographic or sectorial priorities – e.g. Lyon's focus on literature and reading, including partnerships with other UCCN Cities of Literature; Lille's priority on culture and sustainability, related to the city's engagement in UCLG and Eurocities; Montpellier's interest in Africa, including collaborations in the context of the city's Euro-Africa Biennial; and Nantes' interest in North-South dialogue and global justice. These specific priorities serve to distinguish these partnerships and resulting support schemes from other Institut français programmes.<sup>114</sup>

Common priorities of these collaborations include an aim to broaden opportunities for international collaboration among a wide range of cultural agents in France and abroad, synergies with the network of Institut français' centres and other French cultural venues abroad, and the integration of cross-cutting themes, including the green transition and gender equality. Complementing the partnerships with cities and local governments, which mainly involve large cities, the Institut français' partnerships with regional authorities help to also involve partners in smaller towns and rural areas. Synergies are also sought with other relevant events, such as the Institut français' [Cultural Seasons](#), which can provide opportunities to host or send artists

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<sup>113</sup> Developments in this field may be seen as an expression of so-called multi-level governance, or the joint engagement in policy matters of common interest among actors operating at different territorial levels, evidencing their interdependence. For more on this see, among other authors, Schmitter, P. C., 'Making Sense of the EU: Democracy in Europe and Europe's Democratization', [Journal of Democracy](#), 14(4), 2003; Scholten, P.W.A., 'Agenda Dynamics and the multi-level governance of intractable policy controversies: the case of migrant Integration policies in the Netherlands', [Policy Sciences](#), 46, 2013; and Miralles, E., '[Transversalidad y gestión cultural](#)', in *Manual Atalaya: Apoyo a la gestión cultural*, Universidad de Cádiz, 2014.

<sup>114</sup> Interview with Sophie Renaud, Institut français, June 2026.

and culture professionals. In addition to these long-term partnerships, the Institut français establishes shorter-term collaborations with cities and towns holding international events, which provide opportunities to host international artists and professionals, through the **FOCUS** scheme. Overall, while the Institut français provides only partial funding for these sets of activities (never beyond 50% of the total budget), a multiplier effect has been observed - its participation helps cities and local organisers raise additional funds from other sources.<sup>115</sup>

On the other hand, the City of Amsterdam's partnership with DutchCulture, the Netherlands' national platform for international cultural cooperation, has led to some joint reflections and seminars, as well as joint work visits, including a networking trip to Tokyo and Seoul in May 2026.<sup>116</sup>

Despite the importance of multi-level collaboration, this remains rare. National strategies in the field of international cultural relations, and national governments' positions in discussions at the global level, tend to overlook the role of local and regional governments,<sup>117</sup> which results in a loss of potential synergies and efficiency, as well as a diminished position of local actors in international exchanges.

Thirdly, cultural mobility can be facilitated by local governments **when support for international exchange is consistent with the goals of fostering sustainable cultural ecosystems** at the local level. As research

conducted in the context of the Perform Europe project has suggested, 'Local authorities shape hosting conditions, accessibility, and community engagement, and are essential for embedding international work within local ecosystems.'<sup>118</sup>

Reflections on what has sometimes been called 'slow mobility' are relevant here - that is, the understanding that mobility support should consider more than travel itself, and generate processes and allocate time to '[respond] to local needs and realities, ... shifting the focus to the localities, more extended stays in the destination... and [consider] the vitality of organic forms of production, presentation, representation, exchange and distribution of cultural and artistic work. [Slow mobility] is locally relevant, engaged and connected to the local communities.'<sup>119</sup>

In this respect, local governments should ensure that mobility support includes criteria related to fostering trust-building, meaningful stays and continuity, and conceive hosting infrastructures accordingly. They could also consider how to build the capacities of local actors to engage in international activities, host artists and culture professionals and conceive localised encounters with them, and create contexts in which local actors can benefit from international exchanges.<sup>120</sup>

Finally, local governments and public bodies under their aegis can also play an important role by conducting, or supporting, **data collection and research exercises addressing**

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115 Interview with Sophie Renaud, Institut français, June 2026.

116 City of Amsterdam, Amsterdams Fonds voor de Kunst and DutchCulture, *Staying Connected: Amsterdam and International Cultural Exchange: Feedback Report*, DutchCulture, 2025. Information on the mission to Tokyo and Seoul is available via social media (see e.g. here)

117 Cuny, L.; and Otasevic, I., 'Conclusion: Les villes et les pouvoirs locaux à l'avant-garde de la protection et de la promotion de la diversité et des droits culturels des personnes migrantes', in Guèvremont, V.; Cuny, L.; and Otasevic, I. (eds.), *Accéder à soi, accéder à l'autre: Le rôle des villes et des pouvoirs locaux dans la protection et la promotion de la diversité et des droits culturels des personnes migrantes*, Université Laval, 2024.

118 Janssens, J.; and Valintélyt, E., *Reimagine International Touring. Vol. 2: Levers for Policy Development*. Perform Europe, 2026. The original quote includes some text in bold, which has not been kept here.

119 Vidović, D.; and Žuvela, A., *Slow Mobility: Scenario for the Future of Mobility in Culture. i-Portunus Houses, Volume 4*, Kultura Nova Foundation, 2022.

120 Iacob, R., *Local Networks: (a guide to) Reimagining the Work of Cultural Organisations*, European Network of Cultural Centres, 2021.

**international aspects.** Examples such as the research commissioned by the City of Amsterdam to DutchCulture, in order to analyse the local and national impacts of international cultural

cooperation are just one of the different ways in which local governments and other public bodies can provide an enabling environment for cultural exchange and mobility.

## Concluding observations

Evidence presented and analysed in this chapter shows how cities and local governments engage in international cultural relations and support for cultural mobility in many different ways. This concluding chapter presents some observations based on the information collected, as well as on some elements that may deserve further consideration.

Firstly, learning arises as a central aspect in many of the cultural relations established, both those involving local government representatives and other cultural actors. This serves, on the one hand, to compensate for the absence or scarcity of learning opportunities in some territories, but also, on the other hand, to take advantage of how international cooperation can be a source of enrichment. Furthermore, there is an underpinning awareness that cities' challenges are often common, something that is particularly visible in technical exchanges involving decision-makers and local government staff. Because of the similarity of challenges, cities' peer-learning can be multi-directional (i.e., developing in a South-South, North-South, South-North, etc. perspective) and balanced, something that appears to be more frequent here than in the cultural relations of national governments and bodies.

Secondly, and in spite of the multi-directional nature of exchanges outlined above, the analysis conducted has found little evidence of cities' engagement in some critical issues in the

contemporary cultural relations agenda, such as decolonisation and global justice. While cities may have less historical responsibility in addressing some of these areas, and this chapter has not conducted a comprehensive analysis and has certainly overlooked some examples, this may be something to address in the future. Similarly, little evidence has been found of how cities are considering green mobility in their international cultural relations.

Thirdly, the frequent understanding of cities as 'plural ecosystems', involving public, private and civil society actors, means that partnerships led by local governments may effectively involve a wide range of actors and generate impacts at multiple levels. In this respect, when conceived and implemented consciously, local strategies for international cultural relations can have a positive multiplier, and long-lasting, effect.

Finally, in a current international context marked by division and conflict, the investment made by cities in developing international cultural cooperation and opening the doors to cultural mobility is critical. Evidence presented in this chapter could hopefully inspire more local governments to engage in this field, with means and resources adequate to their capacities, and other bodies to facilitate the emergence of multi-level frameworks enabling new international partnerships and more opportunities for cultural mobility.

# Policy

# Recommendations

The evidence gathered across this report makes clear that the international mobility of artists and cultural professionals is not a peripheral concern of cultural policy – it is a structural condition for artistic vitality, urban development and European integration alike. Yet the systems currently in place remain fragmented, unequal and insufficiently resourced to meet the ambitions they claim to serve. Cities have stepped forward as indispensable actors in this field, but they cannot carry this responsibility alone.

The following recommendations are addressed to cultural stakeholders whose choices and practices together shape the framework within which artists, cultural professionals and their organisations operate: EU institutions, EU Member States, cities and local governments, and the cultural field itself. Taken together, they point towards a more coherent, equitable and rights-based ecosystem for cultural mobility – one that serves all artists, not only those who are already well-connected.

## Recommendations to EU Institutions

### 1. Revisit entry regimes to enable genuine cultural exchange

The difficulty faced by artists and cultural professionals from the Global South – and increasingly from conflict-affected regions – in obtaining visas to participate in European cultural events represents one of the most serious structural failures in the current system. Administrative procedures designed for other categories of traveller are poorly adapted to the realities of artistic mobility: invitations often arrive at short notice, timelines are variable, and the working conditions of independent artists bear little resemblance to those of the salaried professionals that consular processes tend

to assume as a default. For artists at risk, the consequences of delays or refusals extend far beyond professional inconvenience.

EU institutions should collaborate with Member States to develop dedicated visa pathways within the Schengen Area that are faster, more flexible and genuinely adapted to the specific needs and working conditions of mobile artists and cultural professionals.<sup>121</sup> This effort should be grounded in a commitment to fostering a deeper understanding of the arts and cultural ecosystem among those responsible for visa evaluation. Equipping civil servants, consular staff, and personnel in interior and foreign affairs ministries with the knowledge necessary to make informed decisions on

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<sup>121</sup> See On the Move's [Communiqué on the First-ever EU Visa Strategy](#) (29 January 2026): 'On the Move particularly welcomes the following aspects of the EU Visa Strategy:

- Recognition of the arts and cultural sector's contribution to economic growth and competitiveness: The Strategy explicitly acknowledges artists and cultural professionals as contributors to Europe's economic growth and competitiveness, and recognises that visa policy must support this role. As stated in the Strategy, "Academics, artists and cultural professionals also play a role in enhancing the global competitiveness of the EU by fostering international collaboration".'

cultural visa applications is a precondition for any meaningful reform. Targeted training and guidance resources should be developed and disseminated across consular networks, with the explicit aim of enabling more informed, consistent and culturally literate decision-making in the Schengen Area and beyond.

This initiative aligns directly with existing international commitments. Article 16 of the 2005 UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions places an explicit obligation on developed countries to facilitate access for artists and cultural professionals from developing countries – an obligation that current visa practices frequently undermine in effect, whatever the stated intent. EU institutions should ensure that this commitment is operationalised in concrete procedural terms, not merely invoked as a principle. The recently published EU Visa Strategy, which explicitly acknowledges artists and cultural professionals as contributors to Europe’s economic growth and competitiveness, offers a timely opening to advance this agenda.<sup>122</sup>

## 2. Strengthen and expand Culture Moves Europe as the dedicated European fund for cultural mobility

Culture Moves Europe is the flagship European cultural mobility programme and a vital complement to the limited number of city-led travel support schemes that exist across the continent. Its strongly positive evaluation and relatively simplified access procedures demonstrate that the model works – and that it should now be scaled up and deepened. EU institutions should increase Culture Moves Europe’s budget

significantly, reflecting the growing demand for mobility support and the scarcity of public funds in most participating countries.

Critically, the programme’s design should shift towards a more demand-led offer: rather than primarily supporting organisations to host, Culture Moves Europe should focus on the needs of individual artists and collectives, including support for touring and export mobility. Accessibility should remain a guiding principle throughout, with enhanced top-ups for cultural practitioners with disabilities and for those with family or caring responsibilities.<sup>123</sup> EU institutions should also allow for recurring mobility experiences, acknowledging that meaningful international relationships take time to establish and sustain – a single residency or visit is rarely sufficient to build the kind of durable collaboration that transforms artistic practice.

Finally, Culture Moves Europe’s scope should be extended to encompass the media and audiovisual sectors, whose mobility needs remain insufficiently addressed by existing instruments. Culture Moves Europe should be understood in explicit complementarity with offer-led instruments such as the ECoC programme and Creative Europe cooperation projects: where these provide a specific thematic, geographic and institutional framework within which host cities and organisations pursue their ambitions, Culture Moves Europe enables individual artists and cultural professionals to set their own agenda, develop international relationships on their own terms, and pursue projects shaped by their own needs and aspirations. Both logics are legitimate and necessary, and neither can substitute for the other.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> See more detailed policy recommendations in:

- Watts, K., [International Mobility of Artists and Culture Professionals: The Lexicon](#), On the Move, 2024.
- Dowden, S.; Floch, Y. (ed.); Ilić, M.; and Wilson, C. R., [Cultural Mobility Flows Report – Mental Health, Well-being and International Cultural Mobility](#), On the Move, 2024.
- Ellingsworth, J., [Schengen Visa Code and Cultural Mobility: Latest Insights with a Focus on Artists and Culture Professionals from the African Continent](#), On the Move, 2023.

<sup>123</sup> See more detailed policy recommendations in Baltà Portolés, J.; Dowden, S.; Floch, Y. (ed.); and Ellingsworth, J., [Cultural Mobility Flows Report – The International Mobility of Disabled Artists and Culture Professionals](#), On the Move, 2024.

<sup>124</sup> See more detailed policy recommendations in Baltà Portolés, J.; Floch, Y.; Fol, M.; Sert, M.; and Staines, J. (ed.), [i-Portunus Operational Study – Mobility Scheme for Artists and Culture Professionals in Creative Europe Countries](#), On the Move, 2019.

### **3. Leverage EU cultural programmes as engines for transnational cooperation and mobility**

The European Capitals of Culture programme has demonstrated its capacity to transform city-level cultural ecosystems, extend mobility opportunities to peripheral cities and generate lasting legacies of internationalisation. EU institutions should build on this success by making the programme's international dimension more explicit and ambitious. The current framework (2020–2033) missed an opportunity to formally embed connections between European cities and partners in Africa, Latin America and other world regions. A revised framework should build on such precedents by requiring and resourcing intercontinental partnerships, and by strengthening legacy mechanisms – including sustained mobility funding – so that the internationalisation of practice does not end with the title year.

Beyond the ECoC, EU institutions should ensure that the full ecosystem of relevant programmes – Creative Europe cooperation projects, the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) programme including the Town Twinning and Interreg programmes – is designed and resourced as a coherent set of complementary instruments rather than a fragmented collection of isolated calls. The CERV Town Twinning programme, in particular, deserves greater recognition as a vehicle for city-level cultural exchange, given its unique accessibility to small towns and peripheral regions that are rarely reached by more competitive European programmes. EU institutions should explicitly encourage the integration of a cultural dimension into twinning activities.

EU institutions should also encourage ECoC cities to invest in adaptable, inclusive and

community-centred cultural infrastructure as part of their mobility strategies: temporary, modular and multi-purpose spaces that can respond flexibly to varied formats of international collaboration; decentralised venues in peripheral neighbourhoods; and the transformation of heritage buildings as living cultural sites. Participatory design – co-creating spaces with residents, grassroots organisations and independent artists – should be a guiding principle, ensuring that visiting international artists are received into genuinely engaged local ecosystems.

### **4. Address the specific mobility needs of artists in Outermost Regions, and Overseas Countries and Territories**

Artists and cultural professionals based in the EU's Outermost Regions (ORs) and Overseas Countries and Territories (OCTs) face a distinct and largely unaddressed set of mobility challenges. Their organic cultural interlocutors are often peripheral, Global South or international stakeholders rather than mainland European partners, yet existing mobility programmes are rarely designed with these geographies and relational patterns in mind. Mobility circuits and opportunities with neighbouring countries and regions should be far better supported – whether through a dedicated strand within Culture Moves Europe or through tailored mobility programmes co-designed with cultural actors from these territories.

This should be complemented by sustained investment in local capacity-building, equipping coordination teams in ORs and OCTs with the skills, staffing and resources necessary to manage both inward and outward mobility schemes on terms that reflect their specific geographic, cultural and institutional contexts.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> See more detailed policy recommendations in Floch, Y. (ed.); and Ellingsworth, J., [Cultural Mobility Flows Report – European Outermost Regions and Overseas Countries and Territories](#), On the Move, 2022.

## 5. Address the specific mobility needs of Indigenous creatives

Indigenous artists and cultural professionals remain among the most systematically excluded from European cultural mobility frameworks, and this requires a dedicated and principled response. EU institutions should align their cultural initiatives with international instruments – including the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples ([UNDRIP](#)) and the [UNESCO Policy on Engaging with Indigenous Peoples](#) – embedding Indigenous cultural rights not as an afterthought but as a structuring principle of policy design. Indigenous-led networks and governance structures should be supported at the European level, ensuring that Indigenous voices shape the design and implementation of mobility programmes. This requires recognising Indigenous arts as living, contemporary practices rather than ethnographic heritage, and dismantling the tokenistic approaches that have too often substituted for genuine, long-term collaboration.<sup>126</sup> The integration of environmental justice into cultural mobility policy is particularly resonant in this context: investing in sustainable models of cultural circulation is also an opportunity to draw meaningfully on Indigenous ecological knowledge.

## 6. Strengthen protection mechanisms for artists at risk and forcibly displaced

The growing number of artists and cultural professionals facing armed conflict, persecution, censorship or forced displacement requires a more coordinated and adequately resourced European response. The current legal and policy framework was not designed with these realities in mind: administrative procedures are slow, responsibilities are dispersed across governance levels, and the specific vulnerabilities of cultural

practitioners in crisis situations receive little systematic attention. Geopolitical crises – including the war in Ukraine and the situation in the Middle East – have led to a significant increase in applications from artists at risk, making international mobility increasingly difficult due to restrictions, with many practitioners initially seeking refuge in third countries before being able to enter EU Member States.

EU institutions should undertake a comprehensive review of the legal framework governing the mobility and temporary protection of individual artists and cultural professionals based in at-risk contexts, with a view to removing barriers that currently prevent timely and effective support. More ambitiously, EU institutions should formally recognise the protection of artists at risk as a fully-fledged dimension of European cultural policy, and consider adopting a dedicated European emergency protection, support and resilience programme for at-risk artists and cultural practitioners. Such a programme would provide structured, sustainable support to specialist intermediary organisations that currently carry much of this responsibility with insufficient resources, and would strengthen their capacity to cooperate effectively with the cities and municipalities hosting displaced practitioners.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> See more detailed policy recommendations in Floch, Y. (ed.); Wilson, C. R.; and Yeluri, M., [Cultural Mobility Flows Report – The International Circulation of Indigenous Creatives](#), On the Move, 2025.

<sup>127</sup> See On the Move's [research-action](#) initiative dedicated to the situation of at-risk and forcibly displaced artists and cultural practitioners.

# Recommendations to EU Member States

## 7. Coordinate across policy domains to reduce structural barriers to mobility

Cultural mobility intersects with a wide range of policy domains – immigration, social protection, taxation, trade, development cooperation and digital infrastructure – yet it is rarely treated as a cross-cutting priority at national government level. Member States should establish coordination mechanisms ensuring that cultural ministries work in concert with foreign affairs, interior and finance ministries to identify and remove the structural barriers that currently impede the free movement of artists and cultural professionals. This coordination should extend to national cultural agencies and funding bodies, ensuring that national instruments are designed in coherent complementarity with European programmes rather than duplicating or inadvertently crowding them out.

Member States should be encouraged to designate cultural attachés or dedicated cultural mobility officers within their consular networks – professionals equipped to handle applications from artists and cultural practitioners with appropriate expertise and sensitivity, and who can serve as informed interlocutors between consular services and the cultural sector. These officers should be provided with dedicated training on the specific working conditions and administrative realities of the cultural sector, and should maintain active links with national cultural agencies, Mobility Information Points (MIPs) and relevant professional organisations.

Member States should also ensure the sustainable funding of MIPs – information centres that provide free personal consultations, legal advice, online guides, funding databases and workshops covering the full range of administrative issues that arise in cross-border cultural work, including visas, social security, taxation and customs. MIPs vary in structure – some are independent organisations, others are embedded within public bodies – but share a common commitment to offering tailored, accessible and expert support to artists and cultural professionals regardless of their career stage or discipline. Member States should strengthen MIPs' links with relevant ministries, consular networks and legal experts, ensuring that the advice they provide remains current, authoritative and actionable.

## 8. Support and resource national frameworks for artists at risk and forcibly displaced

Member States should ensure that national cultural agencies cooperate effectively with municipalities hosting displaced or at-risk cultural practitioners, and should streamline administrative procedures to enable timely and effective support. Member States should actively support and expand networks at the national level, and should ensure that their obligations under the [Rome Charter](#) – which explicitly recognises the need to support international cooperation and the protection of artists at risk – are translated into concrete policy and funding commitments. National frameworks for artists at risk should be designed in active coordination with European frameworks, ensuring that legal, financial and logistical support for displaced practitioners is coherent across governance levels.<sup>128</sup>

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128 See On the Move's [research-action](#) initiative dedicated to the situation of at-risk and forcibly displaced artists and cultural practitioners.

# Recommendations to EU Member States, local governments and cities

## 9. Ensure sustainable funding for cultural mobility

Cultural mobility funding remains highly uneven across Europe, with some contexts providing substantial and well-structured support whilst others leave artists and cultural organisations almost entirely dependent on European instruments. National and local decision-makers should assess the adequacy of their mobility funding frameworks and take steps to address gaps, particularly for independent artists, small organisations and practitioners based outside major metropolitan areas. This assessment should explicitly consider whether existing national schemes are designed as demand-led instruments – responsive to the needs and ambitions of artists themselves – or primarily as offer-led programmes serving institutional or diplomatic objectives.

## 10. Design mobility schemes that are open, flexible and genuinely responsive to artists' needs

Policy makers should resist the temptation to over-programme their mobility support through thematic calls that constrain applicants to predefined subjects or formats. The strength of city-led mobility schemes lies precisely in their capacity to respond to the diverse and self-determined motivations of artists and cultural professionals – whether linked to the development of a specific project, a response to an invitation, or a broader desire to explore what is happening elsewhere. Institutions should therefore prioritise open, regular and ongoing calls that allow applicants to define their own mobility needs and

ambitions, reserving thematic calls for specific strategic partnerships where the added value is clearly demonstrated.

Reciprocity should be a guiding principle in scheme design. Mobility is most valuable when it generates contributions at both ends of the exchange – at the point of departure and at the destination. Institutions should actively cultivate relationships with partner organisations in destination cities, investing in the conditions for genuine mutual benefit rather than one-directional hosting. In the longer term, cities should consider commissioning studies of their host partners' needs and experiences, in order to develop more balanced and sustainable reciprocal programmes. Assessment criteria should be transparent, consistent and shared across funding lines, based on considerations of relevance, quality and the follow-up of mobility experiences.<sup>129</sup>

## 11. Embrace green mobility as a shared responsibility, without sacrificing territorial equity

Policy makers should adopt a holistic approach to the environmental dimensions of the mobility they support – one that goes beyond the type of transport used to consider the contexts, motivations and impacts of mobility as a whole. Green mobility is a matter of collective responsibility, involving both those who benefit from mobility and the organisations that fund it. In practical terms, cities should consider offering differentiated financial support for artists choosing more sustainable means of transport, covering the higher cost of slower travel and, where appropriate, providing support adapted to

<sup>129</sup> See more detailed policy recommendations in On the Move, [International experiences of cultural mobility, supported by Nantes Métropole and the City of Nantes \(2019-2023\): Analysis and recommendations](#), On the Move and Nantes Métropole, 2024.

longer periods of on-site mobility. Policy makers should also explore implementing a shared carbon footprint methodology, working with specialist organisations to develop tools that are easy to apply and sensitive to the very different carbon implications of mobility within Europe and beyond it.

At the same time, they must be attentive to the risk that green mobility policies, applied without sensitivity to territorial context, may inadvertently

deepen inequalities. For artists and cultural professionals based in peripheral regions, islands and rural areas, sustainable travel options may not exist or may be prohibitively expensive. Stakeholders should adopt dedicated support mechanisms for such practitioners, and should design their own mobility schemes with territorial equity as an explicit criterion – ensuring that the transition to greener mobility does not become a new form of exclusion.

## Recommendations to local governments and cities

### 12. Embed cultural mobility in long-term cultural strategies and urban development agendas

Cultural mobility is most effective when it is not treated as a standalone programme but is embedded in a broader long-term cultural strategy that connects international exchange to local cultural development, urban transformation and community wellbeing. Cities should ensure that their mobility support schemes are clearly articulated within wider cultural policy frameworks, with explicit links to objectives around urban regeneration, public space activation, community engagement and the diversification of local cultural ecosystems. The growing evidence that cultural mobility contributes to urban attractiveness, economic development and

civic participation – as well as to the artistic development of individual practitioners – makes a strong case for integrating it into mainstream urban policy agendas rather than treating it as a supplementary cultural activity.

Cities should also recognise cultural mobility as a tool for international solidarity, particularly in relation to artists at risk and displaced practitioners. As the case studies in this report illustrate, the most meaningful forms of cultural exchange are those that create genuine connections between people, places and practices – and cities that invest in the relational and institutional infrastructure of hospitality are better placed to realise these connections than those that treat mobility as a transactional programme.

# Recommendations to all cultural stakeholders

## 13. Champion cultural mobility as a shared value, not a competitive advantage

Cultural organisations, networks and professional associations across Europe have a vital role to play in advocating for cultural mobility as a shared value and a matter of cultural rights – not merely as a competitive advantage for well-resourced institutions or a tool of national soft power. The cultural field should speak collectively and consistently about the conditions that make mobility possible and equitable: adequate funding, fair remuneration, accessible administrative systems, and the dismantling of the visa barriers that prevent practitioners from the Global South from participating on equal terms. This advocacy must be grounded in evidence, drawing on the growing body of research demonstrating the artistic, societal and economic value of international cultural cooperation, and must be directed at all levels of governance – local, national and European.

## 14. Invest in reciprocity, capacity and the infrastructure of hospitality

Cultural organisations that receive internationally mobile artists and cultural professionals have a responsibility that goes beyond logistical support: they must invest in the relational and institutional infrastructure that makes visits genuinely transformative rather than transactional. Artists who stay in a city for a month or a year should be integrated into local cultural life in a way that allows residents to understand and feel the value of their contribution. This requires dedicated capacity within receiving organisations – time, expertise and resources to accompany visiting practitioners, connect them with local communities and ensure that the exchange generates lasting impact on both sides.

Cultural organisations should also invest actively in reciprocal partnerships, treating international mobility not as a one-off transaction but as the starting point for sustained cooperation. Organisations that approach international exchange with a long-term relational logic – investing in connections that may take years to bear fruit – are better positioned to realise the full potential of cultural mobility than those that treat it as a project-by-project activity.

## 15. Embrace environmental responsibility collectively and equitably

The cultural field as a whole must engage seriously with its environmental responsibilities, including the carbon footprint of international travel. This engagement should be collective rather than individual: rather than placing the burden of carbon calculation and greener choices on individual artists, organisations and networks should develop shared methodologies, pooled resources and sector-wide guidance that make sustainable mobility easier and more accessible for all. Existing guides, toolkits and carbon calculators offer models worth building on and sharing across the sector.

At the same time, the cultural field must ensure that the push for greener mobility does not reproduce or deepen existing inequalities. Artists from peripheral regions, islands and the Global South – who already face the greatest barriers to international mobility – should not bear a disproportionate share of the environmental burden. The sector should advocate loudly and consistently for a just transition to sustainable cultural mobility, one that recognises the interconnection of environmental responsibility and social justice, and that keeps equity and cultural rights at the centre of the conversation.

## **16. Prioritise the wellbeing and fair conditions of mobile artists and cultural professionals**

The cultural field must take seriously its responsibility for the wellbeing and fair treatment of mobile artists and cultural professionals. This means ensuring fair remuneration, transparent contractual conditions and adequate social protection for practitioners engaged in international mobility – issues that are often poorly addressed in existing programme frameworks and that fall disproportionately on independent artists and those from less well-resourced contexts. Organisations should audit their own practices around the hosting and support of mobile practitioners, and should advocate for sector-wide standards that reflect the realities of artistic work rather than administrative convenience.

The cultural field should also pay sustained attention to the mental health and wellbeing dimensions of international mobility. As research has demonstrated, the demands of repeated relocation, financial precarity and professional isolation can take a significant toll on mobile practitioners. Cultural organisations, networks and funders have a collective responsibility to acknowledge these challenges and to build support structures – peer networks, access to professional advice, flexible funding conditions – that help practitioners navigate them.

## **17. Share knowledge, build collective intelligence and advocate together**

Robust, comparable and regularly updated data on cultural mobility across Europe remains scarce, limiting both the quality of policy design and the ability to make a compelling public case for investment. All stakeholders should commission or fund systematic, comparative research on cultural mobility across Member States and at local level, covering not only quantitative flows but qualitative dimensions of impact: artistic development, capacity

building, community engagement and long-term partnership sustainability. This evidence base should inform the design and evaluation of all cultural mobility instruments, and should be made openly accessible to cities, organisations and practitioners across Europe.

The cultural field possesses an extraordinary wealth of practical knowledge about what works in cultural mobility – drawn from decades of programme design, implementation and evaluation across enormously diverse contexts. Too much of this knowledge remains locked within individual organisations or accessible only to those already well-connected to professional networks. Cultural organisations should invest systematically in knowledge-sharing: publishing evaluations and case studies in accessible formats, contributing to open databases of good practice, and making space for peer learning and honest reflection on failure as well as success.

European networks have a particular responsibility in this regard, given their capacity to aggregate and amplify knowledge across national and institutional boundaries. They should use this position actively to build the collective intelligence of the field – translating practical experience into policy advocacy, connecting practitioners with the information and contacts they need, and ensuring that the voices of underrepresented communities and less well-connected territories are heard in the spaces where mobility policy is made.

# About the authors

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