Brno Cultural Forum

**Debrecen, the Caring City**

Thank you for the invitation! I’m very happy that the relationship between our twin cities is being strengthened here and now by sharing good practices, experiences and our knowledge to help each other and strengthen cooperation between our communities.

In the next few minutes, I would like to demonstrate through a few examples how we are striving to improve access to culture in today’s Debrecen.

**’Debrecen identity’**

The roots of Debrecen's identity goes back to the early modern age, to the age of reformation. Although the city has much earlier origins, the „debreceniség” („Debrecen-ness”) dates back to the 16th century, when it was a protestant city on the border of the Ottoman and Habsburg Empires, maintaining broad international trade and cultural connections. Back then the most important characteristics of Debrecen was the strong sense of community ethos, the concept of working for the community and the defining cohesive role of culture and education. Just an example: the literacy rate in early modern Debrecen exceeded 80 percent.

Thanks to this, the city's ethos of caring for its citizens is alive and well to this day, which encompasses not only the web of social care, healthcare and welfare, but also the cultural life.

The system of cultural institutions, maintained by the city covers the most important areas of culture and physically the entire city.

**Debrecen in the second decade of the 21st century**

Debrecen as the second largest city in Hungary with a population of 200.000, is currently undergoing a huge dynamic development on a historic scale, making it not only the secondary pole of the country, but also a dominant economic centre of the whole region, and it is also aiming to become an important regional network hub for education and culture. One of the important consequences of this dynamic development is the transformation of the city's social and cultural composition, which assigns new tasks for cultural actors and requires new practices. One of the great challenges of the present and the near future is to strengthen social and community cohesion by integrating new residents into the city and responding to new situations arising from changing lifestyles.

**Debrecen’s cultural system today**

The main spaces and actors in the cultural life of Debrecen are the cultural institutions maintained by the city’s local government.

In Hungary today each city is responsible for maintaining its own cultural infrastructure, with the exception of the main national institutions in Budapest. In terms of funding the hungarian government also plays a significant role in varying degrees.

The local government of Debrecen maintains the largest system of cultural institutions in the country after Budapest, mostly from its own resources, in several cases there is zero state support in the budget of individual institutions. The city's budget for 2023 included €15.000.000 for the maintenance of cultural institutions, which will cover the operation of ten institutions, around 1000 employees and around twenty buildings and community spaces. In addition, around €250.0000 is reserved for supporting the cultural work of NGOs and other actors.

**Inclusion, improving access to culture**

As I mentioned, one of the great challenges facing the city today is to strengthen its role in society, that’s why cultural spaces, practices and communities play a key role. The local government plays a direct and active role in promoting these activities through infrastructure and support systems, mentioned above briefly.

In order to make cultural life more accesible, we have to define three target groups, which also defines the required methods and practices. These groups are:

- socially underprivileged people

- people with disabilities

- different nationalities.

**Good practices**

Improving access to culture is part of the work of all institutions in some form. Here are a few examples:

* Déri Museum's invisible exhibition aims to promote communication and sensitisation between blind and visually impaired and healthy people
* DEMKI's community spaces focus on elderly and young people, offering opportunities, spaces and mentoring support for cultural self-organisation
* MODEM's contemporary art and art education projects targeting underpriviliged groups
* - Vojtina Puppet Theatre runs special CSR programs to provide access to theatre for children living with disabilities and underprivileged children in small towns
* Méliusz Library has created foreign language collections, including thematic sections in Polish, Ukrainian, English, Chinese, German and French.

The NGOs supported by the local government also carry out a number of cultural activities, aiming to improve cultural accessibility.

The city’s local government not only aims to provide financial support, but also to act as a mentor and mediator, encouraging cooperation between the various cultural actors. In its mentor and mediator role, strengthening cooperation between civil communities, private enterprises and public institutions (educational and cultural institutions) is a priority.

Here are three good practices from the last two years:

* the aim of the Made in Debrecen mini festival is to help the city's music bands to get on stage by performing free concerts in several places in the city centre (private venues, public institutions and civil organizations) for a whole day. This year 162 local bands had the opportunity to perform in front of an audience, for a significant part of them this was their first appearance. The event is organised by an NGO, which also runs Rockssuli (Rockschool). Rocksuli is a civil educational institution that has been operating for more than 30 years, where currently more than 500 citizen are learning about rock music, playing various instruments or even starting a career in music and management. The city supports Made in Debrecen by providing marketing and financial support, as well as Rocksuli has been receiving financial support since 2020 (€15.000). The event is expected to support not only the multiplication of bands, the improvement of young people's prospects, the involvement of foreign students, but also the development of new venues, in other words, Made in Debrecen is a complex cultural development programme.
* - The Friends of the Book Network (We Love Books) was launched in spring of 2022 with the aim of creating a platform for urban communities, that consider the culture of reading books and literature as a shared value. Today the network has around sixty members, including NGOs from public education and cultural institutions and private companies, partners from Nagyvárad and a library from a nearby town. The network is the brainchild of the cultural department of the city, which acts as a mediator, supporting the network's organisation through communication and marketing activities (debrecenliterature.hu website and social media platforms) and a microgrant funding application (a dozen projects will be launched this year).
* The Downtown Creative Community is also the brainchild of the local government, in this case different types of actors (public institutions, NGOs, private companies) with various activities are encouraged to work together in order to rehabilitate a downtown quarter, that has lost its role in the city. The essence of this project is to reintegrate this area into the life of the city organically, involving local partners, rather than using artificial means. The methodology of the project involves the city's efforts to, on one hand, attract new actors to the area, increase interest among the local population in the district, and simultaneously build a local identity (e.q. through murals). On the other hand, it doesn't bring various community activities and cultural programs 'from the outside,' but instead entrusts the cultural actors to articulate their needs. Its presence is limited to the above-outlined mediator role (thereby avoiding the trap where artificially generated situations don’t reflect the real needs and capabilities of the community). The benefits of collaborative events are that they increase the appeal of the district, while fostering trust and cooperation among local actors. Therefore, they organically cultivate a sustainable community.

Ladies and Gentlemen! I hope that these examples will inspire you to strengthen your own communities too. Thank you for your kind attention! We look forward to welcoming you warmly in Debrecen!