Culture and crisis

By Uffe Elbæk and Androulla Vassiliou - 03.03.2012 / 15:43 CET

Why culture and the arts can show us a way out of the crisis.

While it is impossible to deny the severity of the present crisis, it is also clear that Europe has many reasons for optimism and hope. As Europeans we should start looking at our cultural sector as a reservoir of hope, ideas and new economic growth that can lead us out of the crisis.

The Europe of tomorrow is only going to be as successful and liveable as the ideas we have to make it grow. We all need to be better at what the artists are already good at – making more with less, finding fresh new perspectives and exciting new combinations. Art is not only a pleasurable icing on the cake. It is also a way of thinking and a practice of working innovatively with reality that can inspire us all to do better.

Furthermore, while the crisis is economic and political – it certainly is not cultural.

European cities are right now among the most creative and vibrant in the world. Cities such as London, Milan, Paris, Amsterdam, Berlin and Copenhagen are not only major metropolises, but also major creative centers with hundreds of thousands employed in the creative industries, like film, music and art but also computer games, design and fashion. By including culture on a much broader level in city planning, social policy and business development we can create much more economically sustainable, attractive and liveable cities.

Job creation

In Copenhagen, a recent survey by the Danish think-tank FORA showed that the creative industry is the city's most important industry, with about 70,000 employed either directly in creative job positions or in businesses like fashion retail that benefit from the innovations of the creative industry.

Related articles

Reding drops gender quota proposal
Plan postponed because of lack of support within European Commission

The paper clip
A round-up of the European press on Tuesday, October 23.

The paper clip
A round-up of the European press on Monday, October 22.

Bringing a touch of Hollywood to Brussels
Representing six major film studios in Europe is not as glamorous a job as people imagine, says the Motion Picture Association's Chris Marcich

For those about to rock...
Politicians love it when they get to hang out with rock stars.
In 2008, 21% of Denmark's new start-ups focused on creative value. In the European Union, the creative industry accounts for at least 3.3% of the economy - up to 4.5% based on measurement methods. Employment in the creative industries is also growing more rapidly than in other industries: 3.5% a year compared to a 1% growth in employment as a whole.

Providing support
The European Commission's proposal for a new support programme - "Creative Europe" - aims precisely at supporting artists and professionals in the creative sectors across Europe. We encourage all politicians to work for initiatives that can get art out of its silos and make art, creation and cultural activity part of society at large.

There are really two tasks here: on the one hand, we have to encourage society to learn from the artists and creative innovators, and, on the other hand, we should make it easier for artists to learn from entrepreneurial practices in spreading their work and ideas.

We have to create real, lasting relationships between the artistic community, the creative industries and other sectors like education, business, production and research, but also our foreign policy and development work. There is a lot to gain simply by stimulating new relationships, and this strategy can create immense growth without a need for big financial investments.

For their part, the artists and creative innovators need to realise their own potential and take back their authority. They need to step once again into the arena as the central players in society's own story. We politicians need to be better at listening to the artists and learn their language, but they also have to be a lot better at reaching out to the rest of society.

We are not trying to coax the artists into sacrificing artistic integrity on the altar of growth. On the contrary, we need them to do exactly what they are already doing - as artists they are uniquely qualified to look at the chaos of the world and create a sense of perspective and hope.

While we all have to accept the crisis as it is, we have to see what it also can be: a great opportunity to re-align our European community and reinvent ourselves in a new and better way. We have already seen how young artists played a major role in the Arab Spring. The next generation of European artists has both a great responsibility and a major opportunity - they should accept it and be courageous. To paraphrase Hillary Clinton, the US secretary of state: "Never waste a crisis – even if it is not a good one."

Uffe Elbaek is Denmark's minister for culture. Androulla Vassiliou is the European commissioner for education, culture, multilingualism and youth. As the holder of the rotating presidency of the Council of Ministers, Denmark this week launched a European 'taskforce' – Team Culture 2012 – whose aim is to draft a manifesto on the role of art and culture in a time of crisis. Its findings will be presented in June.