



Veszprém-Balaton 2023
European Capital of Culture

Gyula Porga, Mayor of Veszprém:

How Veszprém and the Region Became European Capital of Culture



A JOINT BID - MEMORIES

It all started with indignation. The European Capital of Culture bid was announced and Veszprém did not even move a muscle. Tibor Navracsics publicly criticised the city administration, and the issue was put on the agenda of the assembly. Recognising we were right, city assembly members decided in favour of the bid, and within two months, the proposal was finalised. The year was 2004.

I am not surprised that we did not even make it into the 'and the rest' category when the 2005 results were announced. If you look back at the

list of 2010 ECoC entrants, you will find the names of Budapest, Miskolc, Debrecen, Győr, Sopron and Eger, alongside eventual winner Pécs. Whereas our one was nowhere to be found.

But as in all bad things, there was something good in this one too. We learned not to compete.

Everything was different back then. The winner was not chosen in Brussels, but in Budapest. In Hungary, a left-wing government ran the country. And Pécs was a rural stronghold of the Socialists.

But it was not only political reasons that played a role in the success of the Pécs people. Their bid was mainly written by civilians, and they knew what it took to win.

I got to know the leader of the bid writers, Tamás Szalay, who quickly revealed his strong ties to European culture and cultural organisers. There was never a question in my mind that if the competition was announced again in Hungary, I would seek Tamás out.

It had to wait until 2015.

Two years before the new call for bids, I asked for help from this expert from Pécs, and he put me in touch with the artistic director of the Ruhr Region competition. I invited Hans Schmidt to Veszprém to look at the city and tell us what concept we should come up with. After a whole day of wandering around, Hans found himself saying that he didn't really understand what we were doing in the European Capital of Culture programme. He said we didn't have any serious problems to solve. Because ECoC is not about tourism: it is about rethinking and transforming a region. And, compared to the Ruhr region, we did not seem to take the task for granted.

But I would have liked to see progress relative to ourselves.

Not a little: a lot.

Hans asked for time to think, travelled home and said yes after a few days. When he returned, he brought with him Nadja, who also worked on the Ruhr bid, and Neil Peterson, who managed the Liverpool bid.

I was encouraged to set up an advisory board to develop the concept of ECoC.

In the first round, I was hoping for a collaboration of ten figures who were culturally at home. Among the locals I approached Zoli Mészáros, Péter Kováts, Péter Muraközy, István Ladányi and Antal Jokesz. Szilveszter Ókovács and Géza M.Tóth were invited as people who had left Veszprém. From the ranks of those without direct ties to the city, I asked Sándor Finta, Nóra Winkler and Ferenc Miszlivetz to join.

When they found out what their creative energies were needed for, they immediately said yes.

The meetings were not given much publicity. You could say we were a secret club. We would meet at Hangvilla, Agora or Hotel Gizella for a weekend. At the beginning, there were talks on local history, urban strategy, city management, and everyone could tell us how they saw Veszprém's position and opportunities.

The sessions were highly inspirational, although participants spoke from their own perspectives, with little reflection on the comments of others. Then the material started to build up and fault lines emerged.



Is music or visual arts to be the focus of the Capital of Culture? Should Veszprém go for it alone or together with the region? Should we build on local talent or world stars?

Ad hoc alliances were formed, in varying combinations. And after a year, the tone intensified, the debates became more heated. Sometimes we slammed doors or got offended, and everything seemed utterly hopeless.

I complained to Neil that we were falling apart and that I couldn't see how we could put our shattered relationships back together, and he reassured me that everything was normal and routine. You can't keep so many strong characters in one place without conflict.

He was right.

After a year and a half, we were able to draw a map of the city's problems. On it, we could quickly identify seasonality, the exodus of young people, the need to develop the creative industries, and finally the two-faced nature of Veszprém. The latter phenomenon stems from the fact that a well-connected community of 20,000 people was suddenly expanded many times over. Socialism brought not only the university to the town, which was a good thing, but also a string of major industrial enterprises. With it came tens of thousands of workers and housing estates. The indigenous and the settled had different patterns, according to the sociological lexicon, and a single identity was suddenly shattered. And it is not easy to create a new one.

When it came to this problem, Hans was already strongly in favour of applying.





A topic of the thematic weekends was what profile to give to the ECoC project. There was no limit to imagination. All were free to flourish. Which we enjoyed very much amid mundane weekdays.

Some people wanted to focus on urban development, others on arts programmes. Some were thinking of world stars. Murak swore by games. He said playfulness would frame the project in a way that no jury could resist. We would have set up swings at bus stops, built slides in Kossuth Lajos Street, where the city's old and young could glide around.

All the while knowing that no one is better at drawing the character of the urban person than Murak. (That's why his Street Music festivals are so successful.) We said no to the slide on Kossuth Street. Still, games were not left out of the programme. To name just one example: at the opening gala, we projected a light show onto the twenty-storey building to the delight of many.

I have already mentioned that there was a heated debate on the question of whether we should run alone or in a regional alliance. We were split into two parties and the split did not seem to be repairable. Murak and Péter Kováts would not even hear of involving others. They feared that the allies would take the focus away from Veszprém and that we would sink to a second-rate, suburban position as European Capital of Culture. I was at the other end of the rope with Misztlivetz, who advocated the 'Great Pannonian Alliance'. Which is perhaps odd for a mayor who aspires to victory. But I have always been a team player, and it was not my fears, but my hopes of victory that were strengthened by cooperation.

In the final struggle, we nominated Kováts and Misztlivetz as spokespeople, whose emotional war of words did not break the tie. We asked Hans what he thought the course should be. Without mincing his words, the German ECoC expert said that we could decide as we wished and run alone, but then we would have no chance of winning.

We listened to him.



The regional story didn't end there. For just as there is a camel with one hump and two humps, so there can be more than one kind of region. We started drawing the circles. The Bakony, the Balaton Uplands, and finally the entire Lake Balaton. Until we decided that it would be a good idea to test receptiveness. Perhaps nobody would want to be in league with us.

I set off. First to the nearby villages. Then to the Balaton Association of Mayors. To the Balaton Circle of caterers and winemakers. To the Association for the Living Balaton Uplands. Finally, to the presidents of the general assemblies of the counties of Veszprém, Zala and Somogy. And everyone was enthusiastic.

Even if all I brought to them were dreams. That together, working together, we would create something good – and win.

My promise was only that the costs of the bid would be paid by the city of Veszprém. So the die was cast, the risk was taken...

A smooth sea does not make a skilled sailor. Time was running out and put a limit to the stream of words. Conversations need to be structured. This was no different in our case. Ten months before the deadline, we started looking for a bid writer.

By then, the strategic issues had been decided. The content had to be given shape. We knew that it was no use having a good play if there was no company that could put it on stage.

In the course of the search, there was one candidate who was less attuned to the needs of the competition than to their own historical memory. We were encouraged to reconstruct a battle against the Turks on the ice of Lake Balaton. Which led us to conclude that this was not our person.

This time again, it was proved that things have their own time. I found Andras Csité's knowledge of the Hétfa team when it was needed most. From them, we recruited Szabolcs Baranyai and Friderika Mike, who were able to bring disparate ideas together. They squeezed us into the bid framework.

They turned the venue of our meetings into a workspace.

Alongside the strategic work group, we also formed the Arts Council, mainly made up of leaders and staff from cultural institutions in Veszprém. They had to fit into the strategy, in which we defined community building, sustainability, tradition, volunteering and innovation as core values.

The Arts Council had to translate these principles into 'programming language', drawing on local, Hungarian and international performers and productions. Not incidentally, to demonstrate that the Veszprém ECoC project will not focus on infrastructure, but rather on the quality of the experience.

It was then that we stepped out of the 'undercover' era. We dared and were able to talk about applying for the title of European Capital of Culture.

When the bid writers were in the final stretch, the search for the most expressive title began. We put suggestions such as 'all hands' or 'play in the way' or 'setting sails' on the so-called shortlist.

In the end, the winner was BEYOND, because it was the one that most resonated with the idea that Veszprém, through ECoC, wants to go beyond its physical and mental limits, that it wants to give a new horizon and a new vision to its inhabitants and visitors, and to start a new era of self-confidence.

Before the first jury round, Hans and his team had everything planned. We knew that we had to put up a team of ten people, in which artistic director Zoli Mészáros and bid writer Frida Mike were certain ones, along with the mayor's place. We announced a casting for the remaining seven. We needed a young person from Veszprém who was studying at university in Budapest but wanted to come home. We needed a young person who was a representative of a local subculture. We needed a leader of an associated municipality. We needed someone who understands urban tourism. We needed someone representing arts. The University of Pannonia had to be represented. And we needed an architect. And so we found Orsi Kárpáti, Balázs Jasek, József Kepli from Hévíz, Ágnes Raffai, Viki Szántai, Edit Kővári and Dávid Smiló. All of them made three-minute presentations. And prepared to give perfect answers to the jury's questions.

Nothing was left to chance. We spent a weekend practising the roles.



The first round was held at the National Museum. The jury, consisting of ten international participants and two Hungarians – Csaba Káel and Tamás Fejérdy – had obviously prepared on the bids.

At that time, the issue of migration was dividing Europe, and we Hungarians were not on the side of unconditional admission. The relationship between the jury members and the Fidesz cities was thus not without problems. But fortunately, our hearing was not about high politics, but about our bid. It was suggested that we strengthen the European dimension of the event.

We were seated in front of the committee so that the mayor was by no chance sitting in the middle. In this way we showed that we were not playing in a hierarchical order, but as a team. Thanks to the preparatory training, everyone played their part well.

I was said to have done well in the goalkeeping position, which suited me. While others soared, I concentrated on making sure that our project could be carried out safely. We would have the funds.

They probably believed us, because we – along with Debrecen and Győr – did make it to the second round.

In preparation for the crucial day, we adjusted the elements of the programme that the jury had criticised. And to validate our winning intentions, we set up Veszprém-Balaton 2023 Jsc., which we talked about as the driving force behind the scheme. Zoli Mészáros was appointed CEO, with the proviso that once the real, busy period starts, we will make sure he is replaced.

As we needed immediate results, we did not build the company on brand new foundations. We transformed Balaton Korona Jsc., which was created at a time when there were still serious illusions about the local currencies.

In addition to the name of the company, we also changed the ownership structure so that all our regional allies could call themselves shareholders.

This was how we dotted our I's and crossed our T's.



The second round was held in December. The jury first toured the cities still in the running, and then announced another audition at MÜPA.

The weather did not spare our rivals. The site inspection took place on rainy, overcast days. A time when everything is nasty. When even colour is grey. And we prefer not to look out of the window.

And so it was in Veszprém, too. Where we welcomed the judges with modern technology and heated rooms. They had the chance to watch 'spontaneous' music rehearsals in Hangvilla, tasted the cooking of our international students at the university, and walked down Kossuth Street with VR glasses. They strolled through the alarmingly empty city centre with the film of the Street Music Festival playing before their eyes. Noisy, colourful, as we experience it in summer.

To make sure that our guests enjoyed reality beyond virtual space, we went to Csopak. The restaurant, then called St. Donát, offered us a fantastic panorama. All that was needed was clear skies to distinguish it from the fog-shrouded taverns of Bugac or Karcag.

On arrival, we could only make out each other's silhouettes. We had to rely heavily on the visual appeal of the dishes. But no sooner had we taken our seats inside than a strong shaft of sunlight split the curtain of clouds and revealed an illuminated Lake Balaton.

It was a breathtaking scene.

You could not help but hear the appreciative reactions of the guests.

I attributed a divine sign to this extraordinary natural phenomenon. But to prevent me from getting too sentimental, Pista Jásdi, who was sitting next to me, came to my rescue and whispered in my ear, "It wasn't cheap, but it was worth it..."

The next day we travelled to Budapest. We didn't stick to the 'don't change the winning team' rule. Following the indications we had received in the first round, we strengthened the wing that was more European in its outreach and more authentic in its representation of gastronomy. We added Can Togay, who later became our artistic director, Balázs Weyer, an authentic Hungarian representative of the world music line, Zsófi Laposa, a candidate of the Balaton Circle and Rita Wahab, who replaced the busy Orsi Kárpáti.



Our presentation was also renewed. Only the preparation method remained as systematic and precise as it had been before the first round.

While Hans had criticised the home dress rehearsal with strong words – some were even reduced to tears – all went smoothly this time. Waiting for the jury’s decision, the interpreter, who was also a smoker, drifted up next to me and said that he didn’t know anything about this world, but he liked our presentation best.


We’ve already got one supporter, I thought. But that’s not why we came.

The jury president, arriving to announce the results, began speaking somewhere around the time of World War I. I thought it would never come to today. But it did: The winner is Veszprém – the congratulatory sentence rang out. It sent us all rocketing into the air and into each other’s arms.

WE MADE IT.

We, the little ones, the underdogs, won the race of the greats.




Street Festival 2018 in full swing

Some people asked me how I had managed – for more than two years – to ‘feed’, energise and inspire the people involved in the project. But I had no answer. Perhaps it was that I had no doubts. I firmly believed that Veszprém was indeed one of the European Capitals of Culture, but that it just didn’t have the credentials yet. And no matter who said that we couldn’t compete with Debrecen and Győr, better established than us, I ignored it. And all of us did so. Therefore, we did not weaken each other, but strengthened each other. It was measured that one carhorse can pull a load of 3,800 kilograms, but two can pull 10,800. The force doesn’t just add up; it multiplies. And we not only multiplied our strength mentally: we overcame our disadvantage of being small by connecting the Balaton and Bakony regions.

We went forward like a blind horse on fire with racing fever and crossed the finish line first.

It was an indescribable experience. I wish something like that for everyone!

Not only did we want the experience, we wanted to pass it on to the people back home. We went home and put together the Street Festival in three days.



Veszprém had already experienced what it's like to have a handball team in the Final Four, which means that they are among Europe's elite. But the city itself had never before beaten rivals of the calibre of Debrecen and Győr, which are much bigger and richer than Veszprém, in an international competition of this niveau.

In the December winter, thousands of people welcomed the extraordinary success. There was no shortage of food trucks or music. We could not yet talk of a 'cultural capital' taster, but the flavour of victory made the gathering euphoric.

And speaking of a joint celebration, the political consensus in favour of the ECoC bid cannot be ignored. Everyone in the assembly supported the bid, and the opposition was able to delegate representatives to the Arts Council.

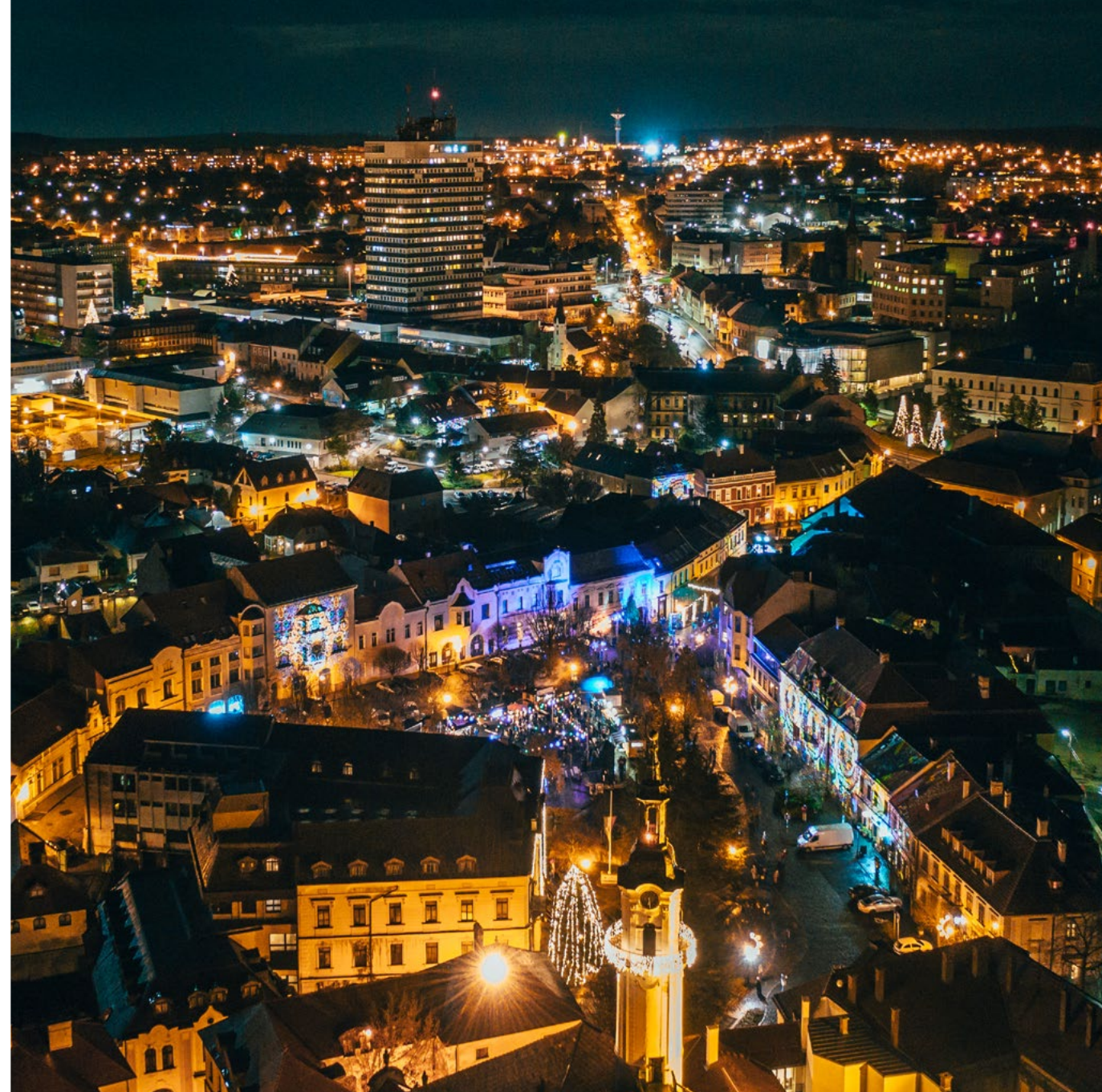
It tends to simplify our lives if we do not put obstacles in the way of our own ambitions.

We won and we did not despair. But it could have gone either way. We didn't have the burden of being favourites in the big race, but the challenge was very inspiring. After winning the ECoC title,

everything changed: we had to prove that we were not only people of promise, but also of action.

With the news of the 'victory over the Persians', I first 'ran' to Budapest. The government had previously said only that it would negotiate with the winner of the bid, but had not said anything about the scale of the funds it hoped to raise. I tried to persuade Minister Gergely Gulyás that the Prime Minister's Office should oversee the European Capital of Culture project, because it is much more than a series of cultural programmes. ECoC is a great opportunity to develop the territory and infrastructure of a municipality or a region. We also agreed that Tibor Navracsics would be the best person to represent the government, and I asked for HUF 50 billion to implement our winning plans.

Navracsics took up his post in autumn 2019. He found Alíz Markovits in Mészlivetz's institution in Kőszeg and proposed her for the post of CEO of VEB 2023. And, not incidentally, the so-called Veszprém Act had started to be drafted. The Act not only paved the way for the implementation of the ECoC project, but also provided for the Archdiocese of Veszprém to start the renovation of the castle, our pride and joy.



The latter development also meant that our beloved Archbishop Gyula Márfi would retire and be replaced by the highly ambitious and energetic György Udvardy. The new Archbishop sensed the opportunity in the ECoC victory and used his own channels to ask for government support for the renovation of church properties.

Plans to reconstruct the castle drew tens of billions more to the city. Overall, Veszprém received an unprecedented amount of state funding.

When, years later, the Prime Minister inaugurated our movement centre, converted from a dilapidated children's hospital, he said he liked the fact that we did not see the government as a charity. We use the resources we have to make our environment more modern and better. So we can count on continued cooperation in the future.

His words didn't make me feel that bad.

It is not strictly relevant, but it is good to talk about: in 2019, Veszprém was awarded the title of UNESCO City of Music. And an Otthon centrum report rated us as the most liveable city outside Budapest.

We concluded from these signs that we don't need to change direction that abruptly.

The beginning of 2020 was all about hard work and scarce results. The strategic decisions were up to Tibor, Alíz and me. Among other things, we had to set an order of importance for infrastructure investments. Priorities, to put it elegantly.



We knew what was being built under the Modern Cities Programme, what projects the EU was funding, and we sought to use the available ECoC money to clear up rusty areas, regenerate neighbourhoods, create spaces that would meet the needs of local communities and, not least, make our city more attractive.

This is why, among other things, we wanted to renovate the Children's Hospital, which had stood derelict for thirty years, Ruttner House and Kiskuti Tavern, which were also in ruins. That's why we wanted to open up the closed-off area behind the university and turn it into a walking and play area. That's why we wanted to renovate the railway station, Auer Memorial House and Laczkó Dezső Museum. That's why we wanted to create the Jutasi running circle, Foton art cinema and the Castle Dungeon Museum. And we were determined to build a digital experiences centre called CODE, an investment scenario that was rewritten by the sudden Covid epidemic and the economic hardship it caused.

We were faced with very tight deadlines. To carry out the investments, we set up Veszprém 2030 Ltd, headed by Péter Lamos, the former head of the urban development office.

While still in the starting position, we had to make it clear that we were not drawing a small or large region. We opened the door to ECoC to all the municipalities in the Bakony and Lake Balaton region. Only those who paid a proportional contribution to the common fund were accepted as partners.





We told the leaders of all municipalities and civil society organisations that they could get back several times the amount they had paid by submitting innovative bids. But they should not be content with revamping the tried and tested village fairs, harvest fairs and pigslaughter festivals, because not a penny will be spent on them.

In July 2020, 60 municipalities were represented at the first meeting in Hangvilla. A year later, with the official start of the cooperation period, the number had almost doubled. 116 members got together, paid their membership fees and stayed together until the end of the ECoC year.

It is a source of great pride that Veszprém initiated and organised the cooperation, which ran from Marcali to Bakonybél and from Sümeg to Siófok.

We are now working on a new project to ensure that the tried and tested links are kept alive and benefit us all. Our hopes for a continuation are good because we have not squandered trust.

The European Capital of Culture project took off, only to make a quick crash landing. It was not the fault of the crew, nor was it a technical problem. By spring 2020, atmospheric conditions had become unfavourable. The Covid epidemic struck, and roads were closed. The government declared a state of emergency. We were trapped in our homes, schools and community spaces were closed, and we were not thinking about the future; we were working to survive the present with as little loss as possible.

The whole world was faced with an extraordinary challenge from Covid. Of the current ECoC cities, Timișoara in Romania and Elefsina in Greece put their hands up and put the event off. We cancelled all our planned experience trips.

Initially, our energies were tied up in purchasing masks, caring for the elderly and running public services. Then we began to adapt to the new routine.

Our strategy meetings returned to City Hall, we just kept our distance. When we got hungry, we ordered pizza.

Weeks went by from pizza to pizza. Only the toppings changed. Not even those, necessarily. The monotony was broken by the prices, not to our great delight. The construction industry had become terribly expensive. So much so that CODE received a price quote that we could not afford. We gave up one of our biggest attractions, which would have put Veszprém on a par with Tokyo and Paris. We inflicted deep pain on ourselves. We didn't even dare to tell the crew about the decision. In particular, it was difficult to dissuade the artistic director, Can Togay, who was enthusiastic about the project, from adding to the futile anticipation with his statements.

We secretly hoped that by some miracle we would find an emergency exit.

It took a few months. In our defence, it did not seem at all obvious that a slice of our past, Dimitrov House of Culture, named after the last chairman of Comintern, would be home to the digital experiences centre of the future.

And yet it turned out to be.





Perhaps the strongest leitmotif of the European Capital of Culture project is STILL. It all happened against the odds, against appearances and against threats. From the conception of the idea, through bidding for the title and the Covid campaign, to the reception of CODE.

We never gave up.

The elements of the cultural menu grew from year to year. We had already our Veszprémfest, Gizella Day, Street Music, Rozé Riesling Jazz, Auer, Dance and Operetta festivals. We started from really excellent foundations.

The ECoC course first came to life with Film Picnic. In the summer of 2020, we staged screenings of Hungarian films in the city. Out of this grew the Motion Picture Festival, which since 2021 has been building itself up brick by brick – now including Balatonfűred and Balatonalmádi – to one day become the Hungarian Karlovy Vary or Cannes.



Off-Season literary festival is among the oldest children of the capital of culture and has all the potential to become an integral part of the city's life for a long time to come.



Papírkutya (Paper Dog), which has become popular as a cultural space for podium discussions and club bands, is also a key element in this line-up.

Digital Meat Store (copyright by Tibor Navracscics – the name has been changed to Digital Knowledge Centre), an online training centre, was the first ECoC investment. This, when combined with the University of Pannonia and CODE – due to be inaugurated in May – will become an important base for the creative industry in Veszprém.



What else is in the pipeline? It's hard to choose from the thousands of moments of seven years. But planning the opening day, putting together the mosaic of events, is an unforgettable memory. For example, the moment when Tibor Navracscics, the government commissioner, asked the programme officers in autumn 2019!!! when they were going to schedule the opening day and what the concept of the event would be.

Can Togay and team were dumbfounded. And their argument that there were still three and a half years to go didn't work. Tibor insisted on the fastest possible answer. Because he knew that the opening day gave the first impression, something you can't get a second time. If you make a mistake on the first day, it takes a long time to correct it. If you ever can.

But there was no mistake then and there.

The opening day, 21st January 2023, could not have gone down better. In Hangvilla and in the city squares, a huge crowd greeted the start of the European Capital of Culture year in a fantastic atmosphere. An opening in which seven years of struggles, fights, disappointments and joys came together.



P.S. Gyárkert (Factory'ard) was not left to the end because I forgot about it or because it was a product to be ashamed of. Gyárkert became a postscript because its existence had not been possible to plan at the time of writing. Mostly because the place where we created it – after all – was not our property. And there seemed to be no chance of acquiring it. The plot of land of the furniture factory was owned by Gábor Várszegi, and he set the purchase price so high that we could not buy it.

We wanted it badly, but we couldn't afford it.

It was already in the year 2020 when Government Commissioner Tibor Navracsics visited the Prime Minister and persuaded him to help heal the wound caused by a dilapidated furniture factory in the heart of Europe's future Capital of Culture. Viktor Orbán was aware of the problem but had never before asked how much it would cost to heal. This time he did.

In response, we prepared a budget of 3.3 billion forints. We now own the area we had been tiptoeing around. All that was left was what programme to put in this area, so Murak took it upon himself to develop the content. And 'off tender' we dreamed up Gyárkert. A concert venue with the biggest crowds, and one that burned in retinas and hearts.

When I was standing in the audience listening to Iggy Pop, I thought back to a good thirty years before, driving to Vienna in a Renault 4, camping with friends to see him and soak up his energy. Then "The Passenger" arrived, old, wrinkled but not a tad tired, and gave us a concert that made our Gyárkert rock.



