

## MANAGING THE URBAN IMAGE. CITIES AS SCENERY FOR EVENTS: A WHITE NIGHT EVENT AS A CASE STUDY

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**ABSTRACT** – Organizing street events in the cities is not something new. Many cultural, social or religious events take place on the streets, whereas many of them have become international events and attract pan-European attention and coverage. Mega cities are organizing festivals and cultural events in order to attract tourists and contribute to local and regional development. This trend has started growing and spreading around Europe. Medium-sized cities are also organising such multi-dimensional public space events. As a case study it is interesting to present a White Night event that took place in Kalamata (a medium-sized city in southern Greece), in August 2013. The shops stayed open until 4 in the morning, offering their products at reduced prices and encouraging people to consume. The city centre provided the scenery for an alternative massive celebration. Parties were thrown and concerts took place around the city. Many people from the Kalamata Region visited Kalamata City. The success was unexpected. This article describes what good can come out of the adoption of a successful north-European cultural White Night event (in St. Petersburg and elsewhere). The implementation of an interesting idea, adjusted to the local circumstances, is worth to be looked into. The article concludes that urban scenery can play an important role to the organisation and success of such multicultural events.

**Keywords:** Kalamata, scenery, urban image, White Night, Greece

### INTRODUCTION

Day by day, cities are getting older and uglier and, at the same time, the quality of life for the citizens is deteriorating. The urban scenery persistently surrounds our personal and public moments, whereas public spaces provide the perfect scenery for many events and celebrations. In towns and small cities, it is common that families with children, youth and elderly people tend to use the open spaces in ways that the line between private and public space is not that clear. Children play outside on the streets, have picnics in parks and squares, older people spend the afternoon chit-chatting on benches.

Organizing street events in the cities is not something new. Many cultural, social or religious events take place on the streets. The celebration of St. Agatha in Catania in February and the street parade in Berlin, the Edinburgh festival in August have massive attendance. In fact, they have become international events and now attract pan-European attention and coverage. Most of the above-mentioned events develop in a linear way, through the central city streets. These multicultural events can boost the urban image up, attract tourists and contribute to local development. On the other hand, the European Capitals have also invested a lot, following the city branding marketing tools, hoping that the title of European Capital of Culture can boost up tourists and investment.

Public space events are also taking place in medium-sized cities, as this new trend has started growing and spreading around Europe. As a case study, we will present in the following a project that took place in Kalamata, Greece, in August 2013 - *a White Night*.

This article describes the good that can come out of the adoption of a successful north-European cultural White Night event, such as in St. Petersburg and elsewhere. The cultural event in Kalamata was more than just a copy/paste adoption of an event. Actually, it was the implementation of an interesting idea, adjusted to the local circumstances, that is worth to be looked into.

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The purpose of this paper is to explore the role of the small and peripheral city of Kalamata and especially the contribution of the city to the success of a multicultural event and, hence, to local development.

### **CITY AS SCENERY FOR EVENTS**

The city reflects the spirit of the people who live in it. The city plays a major role in our everyday life, as it influences not only us but also everybody else around us. The city is the sum of the public space and the private space, it is the three dimensional space (or the environment) in which things that affect us happen. It is definitely much more than houses as Rousseau wrote in 1762: “Houses make a town, but citizens make a city”. People with their soul, ideas, and energy contribute to the formation of the urban scenery.

The city is the space where things happen: private things and public events, happiness and sorrow, good and evil. The city provides the urban scenery for events and action. Social, political cultural, religious, sports events and festivals take place quiet often in every city, mega city, medium- sized or even small city or village. These events can be linear (like riots, parades, marathons, etc.) or spatial (like festivals and interdisciplinary projects). The same space can be flexible enough to host a riot and a festival. For example, in the Bahamas, Bay Street (in Nassau, the capital city of Bahamas) is the site that both the 1942 riot and the semi-annual Junkanoo (music and dance Festival with fancy costumes) take place.

Nassau’s Bay Street is simultaneously commercial, political, and cultural space. It is the space for celebration and dissent, the space for work and leisure, the space for seeking power and from where state and economic power can and has been used to silence the subaltern and to disenfranchise the powerless (Martin and Storr, 2012). Such events can even change a city and take part in the transition of space and the city itself. Even the musical trends can have major impact on public space and public image. For example, today, the image of Berlin and its urban characteristics are deeply influenced by the techno and rave – culture of the early 90’s (Alexiou and Delfaki, 2012).

Also in the above-mentioned case of Bay Street, Bay Street is surely a site for and a product of both social union and social disruption. The 1942 riot, Junkanoo, Black Tuesday, and the range of other political and social events that have occurred on Bay Street coupled with its role as an economic space and a tourist space have turned Bay Street into a space of power, of protest, of expression, and have produced a space where Bahamians are both connected and separated (Martin and Storr, 2012). Okano and Samson (2010, S15) mention that in response to the fragmentation of individuals brought on by globalization, it is vital to expand the positioning of the four quadrants of public space based on cosmopolitanism rather than the compromise means of the “glocal”. Additionally, they emphasize the need for escaping from traditional top-down governance and for practicing society-level governance by a multiplicity of stakeholders.

A question that comes to mind is whether the city actually affects the organisation and success of events. This paper supports the argument that the existing urban image plays a key role to the events that take place in the city. An event would not be the same if it took place in another city. Additionally, when a number of events take place at the right time frame, they can lead (under circumstances) to the formation of a new urban image.

As described by Vanolo (2008), city-marketing and place-branding strategies today often stress ideas and stereotypes of culture and creativity to promote attractive urban images. All these events tend to attract attention and tourists, nationally and internationally and they contribute to local development and city branding. In the globalised environment, in the previous decades, the aim for many cities was to attract the creative class, in order to form the creative city associated with high technology, whereas today the aim seems to be the formation of creative environment and the “cool” city, where people live in “quality”, “creative”, “tolerant” and “exciting” places (Vanolo, 2008), where the cultural and creative industries are highlighted.

The city stakeholders are investing in the improvement of the city image. These events are often seen as opportunities to practice openness, diversity, social inclusion, etc. Besides, we are living in the era of media, image, technology, and the social media and a city image can take years to be built but can be destroyed quite easily. For example, for the young people today, the city of Genova (Italy) is a synonym to a protest against G8 (because of the G8 summit in 2001) rather than La Superba, the city of Christopher Columbus. It can be seen as a city of protest more than the world heritage city, the port of major importance since the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC.

Today many cities are using place branding and marketing tools to adopt a new urban image. Moreover, many cities try to overcome the difficulties that have risen due to the fact that the sudden

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expansion of the cities has left the historic centres with fewer inhabitants and has turned the downtown neighbourhoods into bar and restaurant areas with loud music, drinking and safety matters.

For the cities, this can be achieved by building a cultural brand name through participation in acknowledged networks such as UNESCO World Heritage List, Cittaslow network, European Capital of Culture, etc. and cultural events such as the Night of Museums, Cultural Routes, mainstream or alternative (among others the European Cemeteries Route, incorporated into the programme “The Council of Europe Cultural Routes“ since 2010). The Cultural Routes are at the heart of cultural tourism development in Europe today. Over the last two decades, they have achieved a noteworthy impact and progress and have shown remarkable potential for the generation of SMEs, networking, social cohesion, intercultural dialogue, and for promoting the image of the Council of Europe and of Europe in general.

These street events and parties are not difficult to be found, since the new trend is the expansion of such multicultural celebrations through cultural networks such as the Night of Museums, White Night, etc. In addition, many cities are twinning and participating in networks with a certain thematic perspective, such as the European Capital of Culture, the Cittaslow Network, etc. as mentioned above. The organization of such cultural and multi dimensional events has been very successful and very profitable for mega-cities such as Berlin, Rome, Paris, Manchester, Toronto (Evans, 2003, 2012). It started out in the 90’s and it has expanded like the domino effect. Mega cities have invested in the city branding marketing using the most applicable tools and they have gained a lot in return. For example, in Toronto, Canada, the Nuit Blanche programme alone resulted in an estimated \$4.9 million economic impact on the city and attracted 800,000 people (Evans, 2003, 2012; Jiwa et al., 2009).

Nuit Blanche and other late night festivals therefore engage both citizen and tourists. Although they started out as primarily local and city events for residents, they have developed in size and scope and unsurprisingly have developed into larger scale events that feature on city event and tourist calendars (as with the cultural-tourist events such as Carnival Mas’ in Notting Hill, London and Caribana, Toronto). Crucially, this reoccupation of the city at night provides a corollary to the deleterious effects of mass late night drinking, but rather than replacing this with another mono consumption based activity, a more open and fluid event has emerged that reflects the city culture, cityscape and social life in each case (and often, their more authentic festival roots), under a recognized ‘brand’ that provides validation and recognition to newcomers to the city (Evans, 2012).

For the evaluation of such special event impacts, Cherubini and Iasevoli (2006) suggested applying the balance scorecard to event evaluation based on a stakeholders driven approach so that we can image for each stakeholder different areas representative for main impact typologies (Economic, Socio-cultural, Environmental, Service/Holistic) and many items for evaluating the impact. The framework proposed was used for the Notte Bianca event, an international event organized in Rome since 2001.

### **CULTURAL EVENTS IN SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZED CITIES. TOWARDS URBAN IMAGE AND CITY BRANDING**

Local government and local stakeholders aim at the improvement of the city image so that tourists can be attracted and the quality of life of the inhabitants is raised. In this context, the local government and the local stakeholders seem to be searching for the most appropriate tools to achieve sustainable development. The cities in the southern regions try to differentiate from the other cities or places and build a cultural identity. The new identity is mainly directed towards innovation, cultural activities and colourful celebrations.

The medium and small-sized cities of the South are trying to discover their own identity and invest in it. The most commonly used way for a peripheral city to stand out and build a cultural (or other) identity is the organization of an event (major) or of a complex of events, like a festival. On the other hand, sometimes this newly adopted cultural orientation seems like a painkiller for poverty and the increasing problems, as the fancy celebrations tend to distract people from the real problems of everyday life. This idea is not new; in fact, it is a very common idea to offer citizens *panem et circenses (bread and circuses)*, a phrase used by the Roman poet Juvenal to depict the situation in Ancient Rome, two thousand years ago.

In the financial crisis influenced world, after the collapse of consumption, the South European cities are searching for a new identity, with respect to ecology, sustainable tourism, increase of the quality of life, creativity and sustainable development. Many scholars and academics have analyzed the impact of major events on mega-cities and have looked thoroughly into the results of such initiatives in the urban image and city branding.

On the other hand, the role of smaller cities has also been looked into, mainly in the context of landmarks and new urban design (e.g. Bilbao). Because small and medium-sized peripheral cities cannot compete directly to mega-cities such as Rome, Barcelona, Madrid, Berlin, London, Paris, etc., the local stakeholders have to approach new public audience (e.g. families with children, youth, etc.). Bearing in mind that the cultural audience is limited, small cities have to adopt successful ideas and adjust them to local circumstances. At the same time, they try to benefit from international experience and, hopefully, learn from the mistakes others have already made.

Worth mentioning examples can be considered the Pink Night Festival (La Notte Rosa), an annual festival, staged along the Romagna coastal region, in Italy (Giovanardi et al., 2014) and the Košice White Night in Slovakia, demonstrated as *a Festival of light that gives life to night by the artistic play of light and music* (Visit Košice, 2014; Košice2013, 2013).

## METHODOLOGY

In order to examine the White Night event in Kalamata (Greece), the case study is the most appropriate design for this qualitative research. The purpose of this case study is to examine and understand the complexities of a single case, not to generalize from the case to a larger population. The value in this case study comes from the extensive description of the event under study that can facilitate the discovery of new insights or extend the reader's experience (Tenenbaum and Driscoll, 2005).

## THE WHITE NIGHT EVENT IN KALAMATA (GREECE) AS A CASE STUDY

Kalamata is the second largest city by population in the Peloponnese peninsula, southern Greece (Figure 1), and the largest city of the homonymous administrative region. It is the capital and chief port of the Messenia regional unit and it lies along the Nedon River at the head of the Messenian Gulf, 238 km south-west of Athens (www.visitgreece.gr). According to the 2011 census, 69,849 inhabitants live in the wider Kalamata Municipality, of which 62,409 in the municipal unit of Kalamata proper. The history of Kalamata begins with Homer, who mentions Pharai, an ancient city built more or less where the Kalamata Castle stands. Today, it is a modern provincial capital, renowned as the land of the Kalamatianos dance and of the Kalamata olives. It has the second largest mercantile activity in the Peloponnese, making important exports, particularly of local products such as raisins, olives and olive oil.

The city centre of Kalamata has a newly constructed pedestrian zone and bicycle roads that provide people with more car-free space and promote an eco-friendly and green-oriented urban image. Two recently constructed main bicycle roads, one across the city centre and one along the promenade, offer new space for outdoor activity (Athanasopoulou and Dragoumanos, 2011). After the 1986 disastrous earthquake, the city ruins were successfully rebuilt and restored. The city of Kalamata and the Plan by the architect Gregory Diamantopoulos and its implementation received the *European Urban and Regional Planning Award* from the European Council of Town Planners and the European Commission in 1991.

Following the new trend that has started growing and spreading around Europe, where public space events are taking place in medium-sized cities, a White Night event took place in Kalamata, Greece, in August 2013. The examination of this event can be a case study for the organization of multi-cultural open space events.

On August 31<sup>st</sup>, shops stayed open until 4 in the morning on a Saturday night, offering their products at reduced prices, with sales up to 70-80% and encouraging people to shop and spoil themselves. Loud music came out of the bars and coffee shops, parties were thrown, and concerts took place at various public places around the medium-sized city. The city centre provided the scenery for an alternative massive celebration.

The White Night event was primarily proposed by the Mayor at the beginning of August 2013, so the period for the necessary preparations and organization was very short. The organization of the event aimed at



**Figure 1.** Location of Kalamata City  
Source: www.worldatlas.com

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offering an alternative shopping experience to the people of Kalamata, tourists and visitors, entertaining the attending people and celebrating the end of the summer.

Many people from the Peloponnese Region visited Kalamata to participate in this event. The approximate number of the attending audience, as estimated by the Kalamata News (2013), amounts to 50,000 people, including people from the whole Peloponnese region, people from other places within the Messenia Prefecture and visitors. The Mayor and the organising committee cooperated with the Chamber of Commerce of Messenia, the shop owners and the owners of culinary and amusement places. Despite the short preparation period, the stakeholders saw this proposal as a chance for a new experience for the people of Kalamata and as a positive initiative that could attract national publicity and attention.

### RESULTS

The White Night event is considered a successful one, considering that thousands of people from Kalamata, Messinia Prefecture and the Peloponnese Region participated in the event. It is quite difficult to collect quantitative data for the specific event in order to make the right remarks, but there are important qualitative indicators supporting its success. For example, the major national media coverage, before and after the event (e.g. MEGA TV, enikos.gr, To Vima, Zougla Online, VIMA Online, Messinia Radio, etc.), and the fact that other small and medium-sized cities take the White Night in Kalamata as an example by imitating/adopting it. In addition, records indicate that the hotels were fully booked and the shops are reported to have run out of food supplies and even water (VIMA Online, 2013). There was queuing even at the kiosks and mini-markets at the city centre. Moreover, there were very positive comments and reports on the social media. The same night, a decision was made to start the preparations for the White Night of 2014. It is also worth mentioning that according to the City Mayor, no outlaw activities were reported during the event (Kalamata News, 2013).

This paper suggests that the White Night event that took place in Kalamata, Messenia (Greece) in August 2013 was a success also because there were specific circumstances that played a role to support this success. The main reasons were the people, the time and the place, which made a good combination and boosted the success of the event: (a) the people of Kalamata, the organizing committee, and the volunteers with the fresh ideas who took the risk of such a pioneer event; (b) the scenery, providing open space, squares, the bicycle zones and pedestrian zones; (c) the city has a seafront and it was like a summer farewell at the end of August, when people are moving away from the beach and are relocating in the city centre; (d) the time period was also good for the shops because it was the end of the sales period, so the products (clothes, shoes, accessories, etc.) could be offered at reduced prices, up to 80%.

### DISCUSSION

The people around the Mediterranean Sea share the same mentality and lust for life and they tend to spend time outdoors, enjoying themselves. Sometimes the limit between private and public is not easy to be identified. It is true that public spaces provide the perfect scenery for many events and celebrations. Now that the American dream has faded out for the south European countries, and most of the decisions affecting our lives are taken at the European headquarters and are driven by financial terms and figures, things have come to the point where true values of life are cherished. Decoding and interpreting them has been a complicated procedure for people, community and local governance. Nowadays, people are demonstrating against austerity measures, the increase of unemployment, taxation and financial circumstances, in the globalised world, whereas, at the same time, they are looking for cheap entertainment, indoors (e.g. visiting friends at home) or outdoors, by attending open space cultural events and parties.

Local administration authorities of the small-sized and peripheral cities are looking for ways to get closer to citizens and listen to the problems they are facing. They also try to attract people from nearby areas and provide them with a combination of events and opportunities, so that they can consume and increase tourism. Some of the local stakeholders seem to stick to the widespread and well-known folklore celebrations and traditional trade fairs, which are spread around Greece. Fairs seem to be part of the Greek tradition, considering that the fairs were the official market place, for goods and animals. For most cases, the trade fairs were connected to a local religious celebration. Although there is no available data, nowadays, these fairs seem to have lost their appeal to people, as the new shopping malls provide everything all year long, even on Sundays, and the consumption habits have changed. The new infrastructure has brought the cities and villages closer and the farmers have easier access to the markets, both as buyers and as sellers. Over the last years, the

traditional trade fairs have lost their appeal to people. An exception to this rule is the trade fair at Amyntaio, in Northern Greece (Golia et al., 2013, p. 56), where the number of participants increases.

In other places, the local authorities and stakeholders tend to imitate other successful events and organise an identical event themselves, whereas others try to be more imaginative and create something new or adjust a good idea to specific circumstances and organize an event that can attract attention. When a successful event is organized for the first time, the success cannot be easily explained because sometimes it can be a lucky coincidence. But in order to organize such events annually, there is a lot to be looked into.

One very important thing is that people involved in organizing such events should share the same intentions. The stakeholders saw the White Night event as an opportunity to entertain the people of Kalamata and the tourists, to boost the market up and to celebrate the end of the summer. According to the mayor of the City, Mr Panayiotis Nikas, the primary purpose for the event was that people would come to Kalamata to buy things and have fun, while the whole experience would be accompanied by cultural events (To Vima, 2013). The Chairman of the Messenia Chamber of Commerce, Mr. Dimitris Maniatis, underlined that the biggest profit was the change of the people's psychology and, in addition, it was very profitable for the local market. He commented that the message "Hospitable City - Bright Night" was successful (Eleftheria Online, 2013).

For such an event to succeed, it is important that young people with specific knowledge participate in the processes. For example, the organization committee of such an event should consist of people with a clear Vision for the city and knowledge of the external environment, who would share their knowledge, passion and enthusiasm. People with different backgrounds, theoretical knowledge and experience and with specific knowledge in marketing, sports management and event organization should also join forces. The marketing mix has to be successfully applied, as well.

After the event, it can also be a good idea to prepare questionnaires to be distributed among the policy makers, the people who participated, and the shop owners, in order to collect the important data that has to be thoroughly looked into so that useful results can be concluded. The satisfaction of the participants and their intention to revisit the city or the event can be measured and predicted in this way. The financial impact of the event can also be measured.

One thing that should be pointed out is that the White Night event in Kalamata in 2013 was primarily a shopping/consuming event and secondly a cultural event. The official program organized by the Municipality of Kalamata and the Organizing Committee included many cultural events, e.g. street disco parties, live music by local bands, local DJs and radio producers, broadcasting live from the main city square (Figure 2). Also, sports clubs demonstrated their activities and contributed to the joyful atmosphere.



**Figure 2.** *White Night in Kalamata on 31 August 2013*  
Source: www.kalamatain.gr

It is worth mentioning that most of the participants who took part actively and delivered the side-activities and shows were volunteers who did not get paid and put their enthusiasm and positive energy to the success of the event. Also, the shop owners lit white candles outside their stores, beautifully set on small tables that were put on the pavement. This added to the romantic atmosphere, on the warm August evening, welcoming the customers.

In the summer of 2014, another similar event took place. The second White Night attracted media coverage and attention as well. It was another Saturday evening, which was also attended by thousands of people, despite the summer rain, that suddenly seemed to be a threat to the success of the event. The main difference between the two events was that the second year, the city and the shop owners were better organised and the visitors were better informed and better prepared. Thus, they were ready to shop and

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consume, and the shop owners had more surprises for them. Once data on the event and the organizational costs are given out, further comments can be made on the profits and the risks taken up for the continuation and the improvement of the White Night event in Kalamata.

Prior to the White Night event in Kalamata, there had been certain initiatives towards forming a cultural Messenian identity. The Messenia Prefecture has a key role to the Routes of the Olive Tree (Council of Europe Cultural Routes Programme) and the inclusion of the Mediterranean Diet in the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage Lists. In both cases, citizens, private institutions, and NGOs made all the necessary preparations and effort.

Kalamata is a candidate city for European Capital of Culture 2021. Undoubtedly, the knowledge and experience gained by the White Night events can be very helpful for the preparation of the candidatureship.

### CONCLUSION

The middle-sized cities are searching for a new recognizable cultural identity so they can promote the city and attract tourists, publicity and hopefully, investments. However, the most important for citizens is the development of the quality of life. They can all be achieved through the management of the urban image.

The organisation of multicultural events and festivals can contribute to the extraversion of small and medium-sized cities. The urban image management can contribute to local development and gradually lead to the promotion of the city and the development of the quality of life for the citizens.

In August 2013, in Kalamata (capital of the Messenia Prefecture, in southern Greece), a White Night event was organized for the first time. The event was a major success and it exceeded the expectations. The city streets, the pedestrian zones, the squares and the public spaces around the city centre were crowded until the early morning hours. Families with children and tourists took part in the street celebrations. Many shops, bars and restaurants were out of stock, the hotels were overbooked, the participating audience was overwhelmed and the event was reported as very successful on the national media and social media. Therefore, other medium-sized cities of the Greek periphery intend to organize similar events.

Along with the White Night 2014 event, which was also successful, these events can be considered as a new start for the search of a cultural identity. A modern urban image management and the promotion of the city as scenery for events can contribute to local development.

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