



AARHUS  
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# RETHINKING PARTICIPATION IN AARHUS 2017 – FIRST REFLECTIONS

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## Colophon

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## Preface

rethinkIMPACTS reports are an important outcome of the cooperation between Aarhus University and Aarhus 2017 in contributing with new knowledge on many different aspects of Aarhus being European Capital of Culture. The reports will convey the results of the different research and evaluation projects that will be conducted in the upcoming of, during and after 2017 as a part of rethinkIMPACTS 2017. The aim is to make these new findings and insights accessible to a broad audience.

This report is a result of the visit of Senior Lecturer Leila Jancovich from Leeds Beckett University, England funded by Aarhus University Research Foundation. Leila Jancovich visited Aarhus in May and June 2016 and during that period conducted more than 20 interviews with participants and managers of Aarhus 2017 projects involved in participatory projects throughout the region. This was made possible by kind and engaged participation from all of the contacted project managers and participants that willingly took part in the interviews, often with a rather short notice.

The report has been finalized immediately after Leila Jancovich' visit and builds on her impression of a variety of Aarhus 2017-projects and strategic 2017 documents as well as on her extensive knowledge of participatory theories and practices. The idea behind this report has been to publish preliminary findings and reflection in order to be able to share these with projects and other relevant 2017-partners at a time where it is still possible to learn from the analysis. In this way, this report contributes to the objective of rethinkIMPACTS 2017 to conduct a formative evaluation with the purpose of learning throughout the process.

## Introduction

I was invited to visit Aarhus University for 6 weeks in May/June 2016 to work with rethinkIMPACTS 2017. For a number of years I have been researching participation in the arts and in particular participatory decision making. In line with my own research interest and those of the rethinkIMPACTS 2017-team my key research questions while in Aarhus were:

1. How are participation and democracy articulated in the 2017-programme and to what extent is there shared or disparate understanding of the definitions and the aims?
2. What are the processes used in different projects and what might be learnt from these?

The aim of the visit was not only to collect new data but, in accordance with the methodology of rethinkIMPACTS 2017, to provide formative feedback to project partners at a project planning stage, which might contribute to learning and inform practice in the run up to 2017. This document therefore offers my initial thoughts and learning informed by my previous research, textual analysis of documentation from Aarhus 2017 and delivery partners as well as over 20 interviews with managers and participants involved in 2017 projects.

The projects selected for my research trip were identified from the full list of Aarhus 2017-projects as defined in the EU monitoring papers. In consultation with rethinkIMPACTS 2017, I looked for projects which articulated a focus on participation and/or democracy. The following therefore does not claim to represent the whole programme, nor explore the balance of the programme that is working on these agendas, but rather to give some specific examples of the processes and challenges projects faced in order that some initial learning may be shared.

## How Is Participation and Democracy Articulated in the Programme and To What Extent is There Shared or Disparate Understanding of the Definitions and Aims?

UNESCO defines participation in 3 ways: watching, doing and interacting (Morrone, 2006), while academic research increasingly calls for a more specific definition in which the participant is not only taking part in the cultural activities but involved in decision making (Brodie et al., 2009). My own research argues that while different types of participation may be equally valid in different contexts, they have not only different processes, but different aims and outcomes (Jancovich, 2015).

*It is therefore necessary for policy makers and deliverers to not only define the form of participation they use but the aims of this approach.*

Within Aarhus 2017 the full range of definitions of participation are used as the interviews with the different projects demonstrate. But it is worth noting that research undertaken for Aarhus 2017 during the bidding process argued that, overall, the region has high rates of cultural participation (with 70% of people active citizens engaged in voluntary activities and 25% regularly participating in cultural activities and only 12% reporting themselves as culturally inactive). However, in line with international research findings there are clear differences in rates of participation between different types of activity. Mainstream subsidised practices are generally low and in decline (e.g. 8% classical concerts, 14% museums, 26% theatre, 27% art museums and some of these only once a year) (Davies, 2011). The perceived need to increase participation therefore is often framed by an institutional aim to address declining public support for their existing provision rather than to rethink the cultural offer.

Despite the high levels of cultural engagement in Denmark it is also important to note that participation rates are significantly lower in specific groups, such as in rural areas and among ethnic minorities. While the programme clearly has projects designed to address these inequalities in rural areas, there was less evidence of engagement with ethnic minorities, with the exception of the two projects interviewed from Gellerup, and similar lack of activities to engage those of lower socio-economic or educational status. Many projects fo-

cused on those already engaged, either by working with existing activists, or organised groups or through schools, where participation was not voluntary or alternatively had limited knowledge about who their users and non-users were.

*To address inequalities in participation it is necessary that projects have a greater understanding of who does or does not use their services and proactively use strategies to understand the levers and barriers to engagement.*

## What Are the Processes Used in Different Projects and What Might be Learnt from These?

The research involved reading proposals from a range of projects and interviewing a mix of project leaders and community participants from the range of projects described below. Projects were at different stages of development, some just exploring their aims, others already advanced in delivery. The learning, which is able to be shared between the different projects, therefore varies at this stage.

**The Democracy Baton** – a collaborative project between 18 libraries devising participation programmes with and for young people. The project was a response to concerns both about declining engagement with library services and broader disengagement of the young with democratic processes (from voting to volunteering). The aim therefore was both to increase the number of young people with whom the library engaged and to create some shared learning between libraries about how to meet the needs of this particular age group. As such its ambition is to change the mind-set of both the young people and the library.

**The Participatory Museum** – a strategic project run by a consortium of 8 museums to rethink the way their service operates. Participatory processes are being used to inform the reopening of Grenaa Museum. By asking people what they want from the museum and testing ideas for new exhibitions the aim is to reimagine the design, content and function of the space, as part of a wider strategy for the consortium to rethink how they present and interpret work. While the long term aspiration was that the museum service would increase numbers attending, the projects main aim is institutional learning and to “get better ideas through collaboration” (project leader).

**Rethink the Village** – involved a consortium of municipalities testing different approaches to engage villagers in defining their own local cultural offer. Projects included: village clusters working together to share knowledge and resources; participatory budgeting where local community associations were given a pot of money for local citizens to both pitch and vote on ideas for cultural activities in 2017; professional companies, such as Odin Theatre, work-



ing with village associations to create cultural celebrations. The aim across the programme is to revitalise village life, by exploring the role of culture and celebration in rural communities and experimenting with methods of decision making.

**RECCORD** – this project examines the model of culture houses across Europe. As culture houses in Denmark are normally created by voluntary actors (or in some cases by municipalities) they often provide a meeting place for professional and amateur creative practice and “participation” is therefore seen to be at the heart of their everyday activity. However as a research project RECCORD is examining different approaches to such centres and their definition of participation across Europe, by pairing up centres in different countries. The aim is that both the participating institutions will learn from this process but also this learning can be shared internationally.

**Eutopia** and **Gellerup Film Project** – as the largest social housing estate in Denmark, with a large immigrant population, Gellerup was cited in the original application as key to the diversity strategy of Aarhus 2017. In geographic terms only 5 km from the centre of the city, but psychologically divided, with people from Gellerup rarely engaging in city centre activity and vice versa, like so many rural projects the aim of this was to provide activities on a local level and give a voice to a community who feel they do not have one. But in addition both projects saw their aim as breaking down the barriers that stopped a flow of people between Gellerup and the centre of Aarhus.

To look at a project initiated by an independent arts organisation, as distinct from the municipalities, I also spoke to a member of **Carte Blanche Theatre**. On a local level they are working on a project at their base in Viborg which aims to improve dialogue and collaboration between all the cultural institutions in town. Finally to take a look at emerging grassroots cultural provision, not led by institutional structures, I spoke to **Institut for X**. Initially a piece of squatted waste land, it defines itself as a non-curated, non-organised cultural space “for anyone who doesn’t fit in” (project manager). Through funding from 2017 it has supported micro projects initiated by young creatives. Unlike most of the other projects, their aim is not just to rethink existing cultural practices but to rethink notions of culture itself.

A common thread through the projects interviewed was the fact that there was a pre-existing interest in and commitment to “rethinking” both participation and the role of what culture could be, within the organisation. This commitment was seen as necessary for the sustainability of the work beyond 2017. But Aarhus 2017 was also said to be an important catalyst for the work described. Without the Rethink-theme, it was doubted whether the participatory processes would have been employed, as it would also have been harder for the organisations to commit the resources to such an approach, which it was acknowledged was time consuming and labour intensive. Furthermore the profile of Aarhus 2017 was seen as important in energising participants who might not otherwise engage but wanted to be part of something big in the region.

However the benefits of being part of a project such as 2017 were also seen as having their downsides. Time pressure for everything to be ready for 2017 and ambitious targets for numbers of people to engage were both cited as barriers to working in new ways let alone sharing the learning with others. This is particularly relevant from a legacy perspective which will be discussed after a look at the ways in which participation and democracy is understood on a programme level.

## A Diversity of Approaches

In terms of the processes used to get participants involved, a range of different approaches were described, from working with existing community groups and schools, to engaging individuals through local advertising and social media. In Rethink the Village some areas went door to door to residents, while others put information up in local schools or shops. Some had formal application processes to suggest ideas and formal votes to decide, while others had more informal meetings where people could discuss and develop ideas. In the Democracy Baton, some libraries worked with existing schools groups while others worked with individual young people, some put on activities for them, while others allowed the young people to put on their own activities. Among the professional artists interviewed some acted as mentors for others' ideas, while others co-devised work and others took a more traditional artistic director role. All found that the method used influenced who took part.

**A key learning therefore is that diverse tools are needed to reach a diverse range of people.**

However many acknowledged the challenge of creating value for money by providing opportunities for a broad demographic to take part, at the same time as recognising that new ideas emerge best where the process is given time to work in depth with small numbers. All projects interviewed found that creating space to “rethink” approaches or change people’s mind sets (whether the citizens or the institutions) did not happen overnight, interventions needed to be repeated and not just one off encounters, in order to build people’s trust over time.

**A key learning was that while working with existing groups and formal voting mechanisms might engage a larger number of people working with individuals and giving them spaces to develop ideas may reach smaller numbers but has more long term impact.**

While some areas said they struggled to find people who wanted to get involved this was not the common feeling. In most cases, and particularly in the projects where participants saw they could have a real influence it was felt that there was real willingness to get involved. In the Participatory Museum-project the museum's willingness to change their own ideas in response to participants was thought to be crucial to build trust. Similarly in Rethink the Village, the chairs of the community associations spoken to acknowledged that most village societies were usually run by the older generation, but when people saw that there was real money available, through this project, to realise their ideas, different types of people got involved, including both families and young people, who were not normally active in the village. But the experience of the community associations was still essential as facilitators of the process and to support the practical delivery of the ideas. In the Democracy Baton where library staff gave young people support in delivering their own ideas this was seen as more effective than either when the library kept control or devolved responsibility to the young people without giving additional support. Similarly in Gellerup and Institute for X, the mentoring role of the artists working there was seen as important as the project itself.

**A key learning is that people get involved where they can see their ideas being listened to but they need the support of those (professional or amateur) with more experience to have the confidence to deliver.**

It was also recognised by many of the projects that while organisations might want to engage more with the public and people might want to be involved where they see they can make a difference, project managers often expressed a lack of confidence in finding creative ways to engage people and participants said they often struggled with coming up with new ideas. As a result in some cases people felt that the ideas generated through participatory processes lacked ambition. But this was not seen to be the case where creative methods were used to engage people. Odin Theatre and Carte Blanche demonstrated the value of an artist led approach, where the artistic vision could push initial ideas beyond people's expectations. But Odin Theatre were also clear that the "competence" in coming up with ideas was something that developed with practice, so the longer the process continues the more confidence people became in having creative ideas. This has been shown to be the case in many examples of participatory decision making

where participants become more ambitious about the possibilities where the process is repeated each year, rather than as a one off project.

**Defining the cultural offers is therefore not only the subject for many of the participatory processes but creative tools are also a valuable tool for their delivery but long term process are necessary for embedding change and building confidence.**

## Participation and Democracy in Aarhus 2017 on a Programme Level

On a programme level there is a clear shift in language from the original bid document, which focusses more on participation in decision making, to the strategic plan which talks more about opportunities to participate as an audience member. This may relate to a corresponding shift from a broad definition of culture as “culture as habitat – culture as values – culture as creativity” (Davies, 2011 ch 2 pg 14) which is defined by the participant to one more focused on “world class arts and culture” (Rasmussen, 2015 pg 3) defined by the professional. There is some ambiguity therefore whether Aarhus 2017 aims to use participatory processes to rethink the cultural landscape of Aarhus or to get audiences to rethink their relationship with the existing cultural infrastructure.

Among the projects I talked to there were a mixture of those operating closer to the original bid document, encouraging organisational change by “rethinking” with participants to co-create the work and those working closer to the strategic plan, using the arts to inspire participants to “rethink” their relationship with culture and/or society. As such the project aims were variously described as:

- increasing the number and diversity of users in specific services
- creating more active citizens
- rethinking the cultural organisation’s operation
- supporting new grassroots cultural actors and rethink the cultural sector itself

Without discussing the merits or implications of the different aims themselves it is apparent that there is a necessity for the process of participation to be designed to match the intention. However in many cases there was a lack of clarity or a disjuncture between the type of participation described and the aims of the project.

Several project managers who said that their aim was to increase the numbers and diversity of people who used their services or create more active citizens in reality worked with existing users and those already active. This may

be a valuable method for understanding the user experience but it does not investigate or remove barriers to engagement.

Similarly while many who wanted to rethink their organisation created processes that offered opportunity for dialogue with the public, and in the best cases engaged a range of different types of people in a range of different ways, there was often little thought or confidence about how the findings from these participatory discussions would be shared with staff beyond the project team or inform practice beyond the life of the project. This runs the risk of raising expectations which may lead to greater disengagement when not realised.

Those working with “the growth layer” supporting new grassroots cultural actors took a more organic approach, being responsive to need, but this runs the risk of only engaging those who already have the capacity or networks to take up opportunities which may reinforce exclusions of those who do not. Furthermore while money was available through Aarhus 2017 to support new actors with new ideas, several people expressed concern that money, without mentoring support and capacity building was ineffective and unsustainable.

It was clear from most people interviewed that the Aarhus 2017 rethink-theme had significant potency and was a catalyst for new ideas and new ways of working in relation to participation. However there was a lack of confidence or knowledge among those interviewed about how to approach this work. While there are some merits in a broad concept that allows everyone to adapt it appropriately to their context, most people felt that the vagueness of both rethink and participation were a hindrance to shared learning, not a bonus.

**The programme would benefit from providing clearer guidance and shared learning about the relationship between aims and models of participation.**

Most of those interviewed for this research did see Aarhus 2017 Rethink agenda as an opportunity to question their own operations, but there was limited evidence of it being used by municipalities to question priorities. Furthermore while those interviewed felt that regional and grassroots initiatives might be using participatory processes in project design and delivery it was not thought that such approaches were being used by the major cultural institutions in Aarhus or within the 2017 team, where arts and culture were de-

scribed as being delivered in a more conventional manner that did not encourage rethinking.



## Legacy of Aarhus 2017 on Participation and Democracy

*In line with previous research a key learning is that participatory processes need investment of time and money and commitment from both within the cultural sector and from funders to make them work.*

People engaged in the 2017 projects felt that work begun for Aarhus 2017 would continue beyond, as the need for cultural change was wider, resulting from technological changes (for examples access to information online requires libraries to rethink their role), social changes (as people are leaving rural areas there is a need for villages to redefine themselves, and greater cultural diversity requires more diverse cultural provision) and economic changes (in particular pressure on funding for cultural activities). As a result all the institutions I talked to share a desire to provide a broader cultural offer than they had previously and Aarhus 2017 helped organisations to see these changes with a positive slant, rather than responding to them in a defensive way.

But local libraries, museums and culture houses also felt under threat, with many of their services being centralised and wanted the regional programme of Aarhus 2017 to show the value of local provision. From the projects interviewed while town or city centre venues were acknowledged be more prestigious and visible, community based infrastructure was seen as more inclusive. This was seen in this sample through Rethink the Village, where people come together because the activity was happening locally, not because they did or didn't identify themselves as engaging in culture. Conversely one library said their engagement from ethnic minorities had decreased significantly since they moved into the centre of town, and one cultural house likewise said they only really attracted the educated and arts literate, compared with the wider demographic of a culture house in a small community.

Furthermore while most organisations were seeing Aarhus 2017 as a stimulus to "rethink" their role, with libraries, museums, theatre companies all saying they were looking for better ways to connect to their communities, many also felt that this could lead to unhelpful competition between them rather than the space to collaborate. Some argued that it was not sustainable for cultural

institutions to remain as narrow as they have previously (with separate structures for separate activities) and the cultural sector should be less divided, with libraries sharing space with culture house and museums with archives etc. But others were concerned about what was being lost in the merging of organisations. It was recognised that “rethinking” was presenting challenges with organisations increasingly “treading on each other’s toes” (project manager), and not respecting the different roles and functions of different parts of the cultural sector.

**A key priority is for the cultural sector to both rethink what it can offer to be more relevant to its public at the same time as define their core value and distinctiveness in consultation with them.**

In conclusion it was clear from the enthusiasm with which people agreed to take part in my research that there is both a generosity of spirit and an eagerness to share learning. Everyone who was asked to participate did so and many recommended others I should speak to. This is at least in part attributable to an overarching enthusiasm for the potential of Aarhus 2017 and the Rethink theme.

Despite some light-hearted jadedness with the ubiquitous and vagueness of the Rethink theme, there was an overarching commitment and belief, among the people I spoke to, that not only audiences but cultural organisations need to rethink themselves through more participatory processes. There is evidence from all the projects that such approaches can draw in new people, create new and better ideas for cultural organisations and this may be the most effective mechanism not only to rethink the organisation but also to help the audience rethink their relationship with culture.

While all the organisations and individuals I spoke to, demonstrated an interest in participatory processes that went beyond Aarhus 2017, many also believed that for such an approach to be adopted an external driver, such as Aarhus 2017 Rethink theme, played an important role. However many were sceptical about how much such processes were being adopted by other cultural institutions where traditional notions of artistic vision and leadership were often seen as a barrier to listening to audiences. However my research in both the UK and Denmark demonstrates the value of engaging more people in discussions and decision making, to create a wider knowledge base and this is good for the cultural sector as well as the participants but this only works where the sector sees the process as two way learning.

In terms of legacy where there is no guarantee of sustainable funding for many projects there was a sense that the surest legacy was in shared learning. In line with the aims of the rethinkIMPACTS 2017 evaluation therefore formative learning was valued by those who had most engagement with it. Projects like the Democracy Baton's mid-point evaluation day provided an opportunity for projects to pass on what they had learnt in phase 1, to inform phase 2, similar approaches were also taken in Rethink the Village. But there were concerns that this was not happening enough. It was recognised that this is particularly challenging in the context of a small staff team at the Aarhus 2017 foundation. However it is recommended that where possible opportunities should be found to support greater sharing within as well as between projects in the final year.

There is evidence in research both in Aarhus and elsewhere of the need for local provision as people "rarely visit culture outside their home town" (Davies, 2011 pg 90). To this end Aarhus 2017's regional strategy, involving all 19 of the regions municipalities, means that some saw the programme less as a capital of culture and more a region of culture. However there were differences of opinion in the interviews I conducted about the balance of this work during 2017.

It was generally recognised that a key tension for Aarhus 2017 is to deliver an international programme that can also have a local impact. A challenge for organisations therefore is to identify who the public are to engage. Regional projects felt this was easier for them, than for city centre projects, as they did not expect a significant tourism impact from the programme and therefore were more concerned with engaging local citizens. However it was believed that although city centre activities had to be more focused on tourism they still needed to create local distinctive to avoid offering what one described as the chain store version of culture (where it looks the same in every city with the same types of art presented). Participatory programmes and support for locally defined projects and grassroots creative actors were seen as vital to create this distinctiveness.

***While I applaud Aarhus 2017 regional strategy it is vital for the long term impact of the programme that there is support for sustainable local provision, not just large scale one off spectacle or centralised provision.***

## Literature

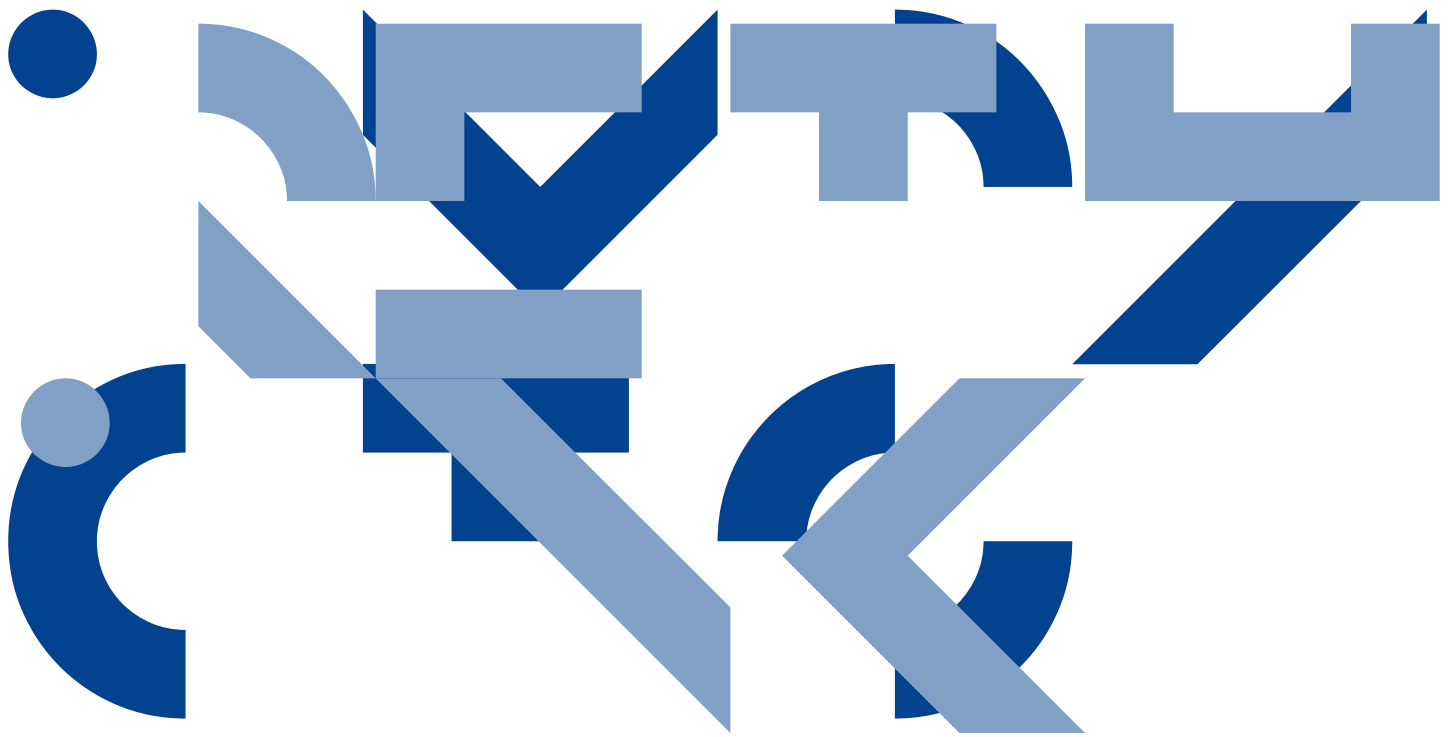
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This report expresses the initial reflections and learnings of Leila Jancovich after her stay as guest researcher at rethinkIMFACTS 2017. More specifically, this relates to how participation and democracy is processed by projects connected to the Capital of Culture of Aarhus 2017 based on interviews with managers and participants involved in 2017 projects covering the whole region. Thus, the key aim was to examine how participation and democracy are articulated in the 2017 programme and to what extent a shared or disparate understanding of the definition and aims exist. Furthermore, the research studies processes used in different projects and what potential learning outcomes this generates. The suggested learnings are thus based on and supported by previous research by the author, textual analysis of documentation from Aarhus 2017 and delivery partners as well as the mentioned interviews. Ultimately, the aim is to provide formative feedback to project partners at a planning stage which might contribute to learning and inform practice in the run up to 2017.

More than 20 interviews were conducted during spring 2016 and the 2017 projects involved were selected according to their work with participation and/or democracy. As Rethink is the overarching theme of Aarhus 2017, so it is also a part of the 2017 projects involved with democratic participation, and consensus flourished among the interviewed participants that not only audiences but also cultural organisations should rethink themselves through more participatory processes as this has proved effective in getting new people to participate and in creating new ideas for cultural organisations. The author's research also finds that two-way learning between the citizens and the cultural sector can have great value, but it is highly dependent on the ability to engage more people in the discussions and decision making.

In order for these processes of participation and democracy to become sustainable beyond Aarhus 2017 it was recognised by many that the surest legacy was found in shared learning, however this deserved more attention, and therefore it is recommended to support greater sharing within as well as between projects in the final year.

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