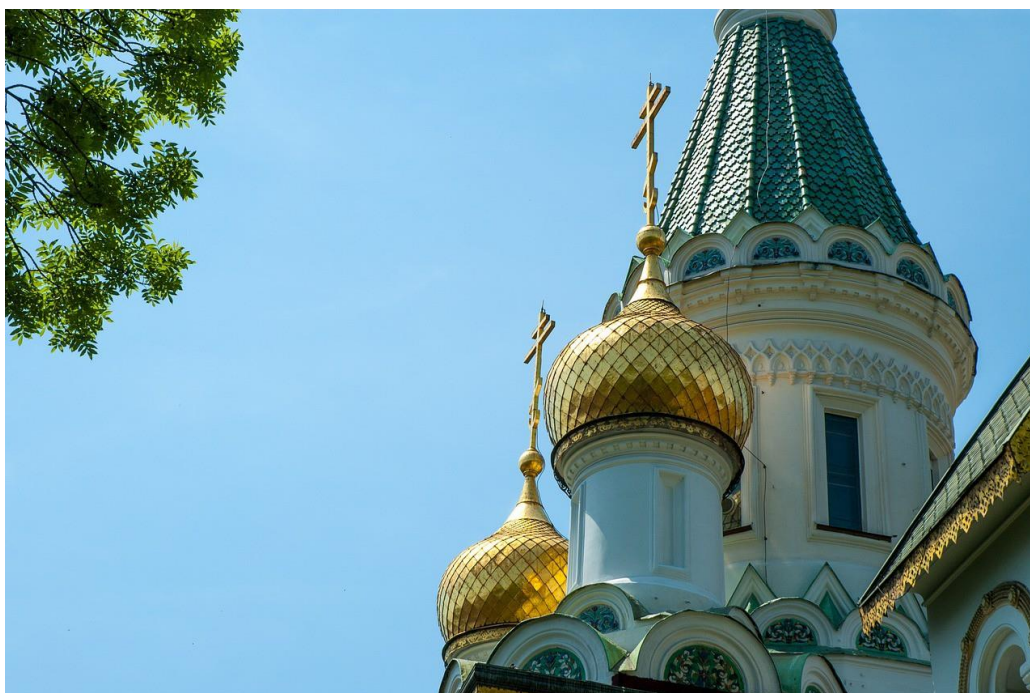




SOFIA'S SOLUTION STORY: THE CREATION OF A NEW CULTURAL HUB

June 2019

Subject	The story of how Sofia overcame the challenges of moving from strategy to action plan and involving stakeholders to create a new cultural hub
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For over two years Sofia has been working to improve its implementation capacities. This activity found its nexus in the development of a new cultural hub in the city centre. In the process, the city overcame two key implementation challenges. First, how do you move from a strategy to an action plan? Second, how do you involve stakeholders in the process of implementation? As a result, Sofia has a new venue for the promotion of unknown creative talent.

THE CONTEXT

Let's start with the context. Sofia is the national centre of Bulgaria for culture, art, creative clusters and business industries. Most of the country's universities, museums, galleries, art schools, NGOs, cultural institutions and business companies are located in Sofia. In total, there are more than 1,000 enterprises active in the creative and cultural sector in Sofia.

However, Sofia city centre has an unexplored and untapped potential stemming from its rich cultural heritage of different epochs, which is a unique blend of cultures, religions and history. In recent years, Sofia has realised successful projects to conserve and exhibit archaeological sites in the city centre. However, in order to attract creative entrepreneurs, the city needs further development. It needs to act with regards to tackling high vacancy rates and promoting interim use, especially when it comes to buildings remaining from the communist period. The city should also better develop connections between CCI and other fields such as education. Another problem is that not all inhabitants appreciate CCI as they often have limited access to cultural places, for example, due to financial limitations.

It is difficult to tackle all the above-mentioned issues on city level as Sofia is a large city. Therefore, Sofia Municipality has decided to narrow down its focus in light of the Creative Spirits project. From this arises the specific local policy challenge to increase the visibility of unknown creatives by giving them a platform that allows the creatives to access larger and new audiences.

The target area is the “Park of the National Palace of Culture” in front of the Palace of Culture, a large multifunctional centre for festivals, conferences, exhibitions, etc. The park is close to and well-connected to the inner-city through a pedestrian zone which is the main shopping street in Sofia. During summertime, it is popular place for people to meet, to roller-skate, to spend the evenings, etc. The area’s spaciousness is an asset in this regard as it permits a great diversity of activities and a large amount of people. The openness of the space is complemented with a small area inside the park that offers a more intimate atmosphere. This smaller space is a former open-air cinema which lies on a lower ground level. Prior to Creative Spirits, this space had been unused for several years. Reinventing the space as a cultural hub that would provide a platform to unknown creatives became the city’s main objective during its involvement in the network.

THE CHALLENGE

It is in this context that Sofia has been working to overcome two implementation challenges: first, the challenge of moving from strategy to action plan; second, the challenge of involving stakeholders.

Regarding the first, every strategy needs an action plan of some kind, a document that outlines in detail, action by action, how a strategy will be implemented. Doing this involves transforming the strategy’s vague goals into specific objectives, designing discrete actions that will help deliver the desired results, assigning responsibilities, and setting deadlines. If a strategy is a glossy essay, an action plan should be a messy working document, complete with scribbles and coffee stains.

Regarding the second, the involvement of stakeholders is a crucial aspect of the participatory approach to urban development. In URBACT, this is ensured through the use of URBACT Local Groups. Composed of representatives from the social, economic, and environmental sectors (e.g., city staff, NGOs, SMEs, universities, citizens, etc), these groups have the objective of finding solutions to their city’s needs. By bringing together partners to collaborate on a specific issue, and by exchanging their experiences at the transnational level, URBACT Local Groups guarantee a more rigorous and innovative result.

THE SOLUTION

So, how did Sofia respond? How did it solve the two challenges and realise a new cultural hub in the city centre?

The key to Sofia’s success in overcoming the challenge of moving from strategy to action plans was the limited scope of action plan it devised. This consisted of just four highly interrelated actions.

1. The overarching action of creating a new cultural hub in the disused park venue
2. Developing a programme of cultural events
3. Nurturing a partnership between the cultural and creative community and the municipality
4. A data collection exercise to measure the success of the venue

By designing the action plan in this way, Sofia also went a long way towards tackling several of the other implementation challenges, e.g. involving stakeholders and measuring performance.

Unfortunately, Sofia’s solution to the challenge of involving stakeholders is not easily packaged and made concrete. Reduced to its essence, however, the solution is to concentrate efforts on building trust with ULG

members. Specifically, this means placing an emphasis on building personal relationships and acting upon decisions as quickly as possible.

THE RESULT

And what was the result? In short, Sofia has a new venue, a new programme for unknown artists, a strong relationship with its stakeholders, and the early stages of a database that can be used to assess the impact of the new venue and its associated programme.

