Ljubljana's year of the book

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Ljubljana is the tenth city to receive UNESCO’s Title - World Book Capital. Its 'mandate' will last from April 2010 to April 2011. This represents a very important opportunity – particularly if Ljubljana plays its role successfully – to promote both the city and the country as a whole, since Ljubljana has long proclaimed itself a city of culture and civilisation. We discussed the project with Dr Uroš Grilc, the Head of the City of Ljubljana's culture department.

Why the city and not the country?

When he took up his current position just over two years ago, Dr Grilc viewed the difference between city and state policy as regards supporting the book sector as a major challenge. It does not make sense for the city to repeat nationwide forms of support for the publishing industry by subsidising publications, purchasing books for libraries and providing other support for publishers and librarians. What it can do is look for alternative projects through which it can make an important contribution to the promotion of reading. The result is an increased level of culture in the city, with greater awareness among its citizens, and greater cohesion. Even before that, Dr Grilc was troubled by the fact that, except in the library field, local communities in Slovenia have almost no adequately defined cultural policy for the book sector.

The Capital project, however, has since the very beginning been able to count on the participation of the Ministry of Culture and the Slovenian Book Agency, not to mention all the relevant publishing companies, library associations and writers – in other words the whole chain from author to publishing company to book distribution that leads to the act of reading, which in the end is the key object of this project. When presenting its candidacy, Ljubljana paid particular attention to the inclusion in the project of the broadest possible circle of interested parties. This approach probably gave it a decisive advantage in the competition with cities of the calibre of Vienna, Lisbon, Riga, St Petersburg, Wellington and Guadalajara. The organisers also invited all foreign embassies based in Ljubljana and their cultural institutes to take part in the project. To date they have received replies from the embassies of Brazil, the Netherlands, Austria and Germany with the Goethe Institute, France with the Institute Charles Nodier, Denmark and Finland.

Even the name of the Capital project indicates its planetary dimension, but particularly in Europe, because of its latent Eurocentrism, the dimensions of this project are often identified with the borders of the European Union or, at the most, the borders of Europe. The Capital project challenges this self-regarding attitude in a number of ways. The other fairly widespread stereotypical assumption is that the book is above all a literary (i.e. artistic) medium, which is a mistake. The project is based on the principle that the book is a universal, global, information medium that the human being constantly and necessarily encounters throughout his or her entire life: in education, in every form of professional training, in everyday information, in entertainment – in short, at every step.

Events

Two events were planned even before the official handover of the title. On 7 April, a new fortnightly cultural periodical called Pogledi ('Views') came out for the first time. This is
one of the key foundations of the entire programme and will fill a gap that has long existed in the media landscape as regards the quality cultural press. On 19 April they formally took on the title of World Book Capital and presented the project to the world public at UNESCO headquarters in Paris, in the presence of UNESCO’s highest representatives and the diplomatic corps. Never before has Slovenia been at the helm of a project of such weight within this context.

On 23 April 2010, Ljubljana became the World Book Capital in spectacular fashion, starting with the ceremonial raising of the flag outside the Town Hall and continuing at Križanke with an artistic production by Matjaž Berger, to be broadcast live on national television, conceived as a harmonious meeting of science, art and philosophy – all through the prism of the book. The strengthening of media support for the book in general is one of the main objectives of the project. The agreements on media sponsorship between the City of Ljubljana and the national broadcaster RTV Slovenia, and also the Dnevnik newspaper, are of exceptional strategic importance, since it is often difficult for books to find their way into the daily press or onto television.

A total of over 500 events will take place as part of the Capital programme. The biggest event in the project is without a doubt the literary festival taking place in May 2010 under the banner ‘Literatures of the World: Fabula Festival’, an event organised by the Študentska Založba academic press. The adjudication criteria required the inclusion of the literatures of every continent, and thus the festival will reveal quite a number of literary expressions and aesthetics that are less well known in our environment. At the end of the project, in 2011, the Chamber of Publishing, Bookselling, the Graphic Industry and Radio and Television Media, a branch association of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Slovenia, will hold a conference in Ljubljana entitled World Book Summit 2011. Topics will include the challenges brought to the book publishing sphere by digitalisation, translation from small language groups into global languages, and pan-European bestsellers. The conference is expected to end with the adoption of the Ljubljana Resolution on the Book. In this way, we shall offer UNESCO some guidelines with which to orient its own activities in the book sector.

The programme section entitled The Book and the City will include 28 projects that will serve as an important complement to existing literary events that already take place in Ljubljana, such as the Slovenian Book Days and Vilenaica. Some projects will emphasise the importance of reading by means of interventions in public areas (buses, trains, cafés, public spaces in the city). Ljubljana will gain several reading corners in public spaces, readings will take place in hospitals, the asylum centre and old people’s homes, and there will be several projects designed for children. The organisers have also given our support to the socially responsible aspect of bringing books closer to vulnerable groups and, in conjunction with Študentska Založba, the National Association for the Blind and Partially Sighted and Ljubljana’s museums and galleries, they will be carrying out a project involving adaptation of the exhibition spaces and exhibits of the permanent collection of the City Museum for the needs of the blind and partially sighted.

Two projects, ‘I Grow with a Book’ and ‘Ljubljana Reads’ will continue and be expanded: three-year-olds will love A Polka-Dot Pot by Anja Štefan by Jelka Reichman, while first-year pupils are sure to enjoy the book of Slovenian fairy tales (and one German fairy tale) in comic strip form by Matjaž Schmidt. The Capital project will also devote special attention to three of Slovenia’s best-known writers: Boris Pahor, Svetlana Makarovič and Slavoj Žižek. We all know that they are the best, but how well do Slovenians really know their works?

The section entitled The Book and Creativity in Fields of Culture will include 35 projects that aim to draw attention to the inherent role of the book within individual fields of art. There will also be theatre, dance and music performances and special exhibitions, all on the theme of the book and reading. One of the major theatre festivals will have the book
as its theme, while landscape architects will be able to express themselves in the creation of a new reading park in Ljubljana. In this way, we give the project breadth and address different audiences, while at the same time we emphasise how central the book is to every creative process. The responses of public city institutions to the invitation to take part in designing the programme indicate that we can expect a whole range of extremely interesting events: an exhibition of miniature books, an exhibition of book design, an exhibition of illustrations, a renovated cinema bookshop, and themed evenings on books and films, books and the theatre, books and music.

'Breakthroughs' and permanent elements that will remain in the city

The project will address an old problem that we have been aware of for a long time, says Dr Grilc. The difference between the 25 million books lent by general libraries, which places the Slovenian book market at the very top of European statistics, and the mere two to three books sold per inhabitant, where we are at the bottom of the European publishing pile, is simply too great to permit the more sustainable development of the Slovenian book. If we do not address this problem, we will have done nothing significant for the development of the book. Our reply to this is the 'Books for Everyone' project, which is coordinated by the Ljubljana City Library. Around 20 titles from different genres will be published in impressions of at least 8,000 copies, while the retail price of a copy will be no more than three euros. The print run is large by today's standards, and the price is very accessible. But the problem is points of sale. There are too few bookshops in Slovenia. There are huge areas where there are simply no bookshops. If we take as a criterion the fact that most of the participants in the project will be bookshops offering at least 1,000 titles and the output of at least 20 publishing houses, then we can only count around 50 such bookshops. This is alarming. Fortunately, the library network is significantly better distributed and includes over 270 lending libraries. For this reason, the plan is to extend points of sale to Slovenia's general libraries, and to promote the published titles extensively in the media. The project is based on the fact that publishers, bookshops and libraries do not see each other as competitors here, and that within the framework of this 'national campaign', each category brings its own specificity and its own interests. All the participants have understandable reservations about the project from the point of view of their own interests, but all agree that it is worth persevering in the direction of increasing the accessibility of books and changing attitudes towards buying books. Book-buying is not, in fact, an inevitable part of reading culture. This is something of which the Finns are very well aware, and for several years they have been far ahead of everybody else in terms of the literacy rate.

A permanent acquisition in terms of cultural infrastructure in autumn 2010 will be the Trubar House of Literature in Riblj Trg. Many European cities have a space like this, but Ljubljana has not had one until now. At the same time we will breathe life into Ljubljana's Trubar heritage by combining the approaches of a library and a museum. The House of Literature is a special public space devoted to literature and the book in general, which will contribute, through an ongoing programme of events, to the lively cultural and urban pulse of the city. The Trubar House of Literature will combine several functions: it will be a cultural and intellectual centre, a book club, the headquarters of a new web portal on literature and books, a gallery space and an information centre.

Within the context of the Capital event, the City of Ljubljana will also carry out a serious historical reflection. It will erect a monument to the Slovenian Reformation, open a new library in Zadvor and refurbish the library in Moste. The first specialist children's bookshop called “Kres pod Gradom” was opened on 28 April In September, Ljubljana will get a new comic shop and, in this way, attempt to stimulate this genre, somewhat overlooked in Slovenia, since progressive publishing houses are exploiting comics as an important tool in the development of reading culture.