

## **In the Middle of the Transformation or at the Fringes?**

### **How cultural managers need to be prepared for their work as “Masters of the Interspaces”**

*A commentary by Patrick S. Föhl*

Digitisation, experiential spaces, marginalisation, opening, participation, visibility, efficiency, transculture, clear positions, more courageous cultural policy... For years, the cultural sector has been cluttered with buzzwords and demands. Rightly so, as our society is in a process of permanent transformation that doesn't stop at cultural institutions and projects and both inspires and challenges them in ever-new ways. However, these demands are often responded to reactively with single approaches to solutions or projects. As a result, it's a constant state of reacting. The gap between one's own possibilities and the growing demands of the environment opens up ever further. The needs of (potential) users are changing too quickly or digitisation is quickly enabling ever-new mediation, experience and production options.

What this means in consequence can be understood very well by looking at the latest cultural development processes in numerous German cities and also internationally. Approaches are being focussed on that enable lasting adaptability to allow culture promoters, cultural institutions and cultural workers to anticipate, take advantage of and even help shape new developments more quickly. The basic principle of partnerships is just as much at the forefront as the establishment of centres of excellence for major transformation topics such as digitisation or transcultural participation strategies, the creation of hybrid third digital and/or analogue spaces, the dissolution of hierarchical structures in favour of learning organisations or the transformation of classical educational offerings into true empowerment approaches.

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### **Where does cultural management stand?**

There is an urgent need for action and, at the same time, a great opportunity to permanently establish and anchor cultural management as a profession in order to constructively shape change processes in the cultural sector. So far, one might often get the impression that despite widespread acceptance in the cultural sector, cultural management plays more of an outsider role and, because of its hybrid nature, is less counted among the fixed canon of cultural professions. Many training centres tend to focus on traditional role models, which see cultural managers as project managers, cultural marketing specialists or financial jugglers within cultural institutions and external projects. This focus is understandable at first glance as there is still a need in the broad German cultural landscape for these important helping hands. At the same time, in the context of social transformation driven by migration, individualisation, urbanisation and digitisation, the self-understanding of cultural management must be nonetheless

questioned. One theory could be that cultural managers are needed to shape the described transformation processes in the field of cultural policy as well as within and outside of cultural institutions and projects. Another could be that if cultural management is not increasingly specialised in the design of change processes, it will – due to the increasing degree of specialisation, for example, in marketing – be replaced by appropriate professionals and become redundant in many areas through the automation of production, administrative and communication processes. It would thus be possible to achieve a genuine emancipation from this attribution of a permanent, specific role of cultural management. Not in the sense of classic change management, however, but as specific management for the context-sensitive design and moderation of cultural development and change processes.

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The existing cultural management canon would not have to be lost and certainly not all existing roles and functions. However, the basic position and the orientation would be different, a self-confident one that co-shapes and doesn't "just" manage – cultural management could gain a visionary position; a forward-looking narrative.

Because of their hybrid character and the many different positions they (can) hold, cultural managers are predestined to shape these constructive change processes. For many other cultural occupations and positions this is simply not possible due to attributions and the positions to be represented – also because change is (rightly) a controversial and conflictual field of action.

### **Masters of Interspaces**

We therefore need mediators, translators and coordinators who can arbitrate between different interests, fields and languages and are empowered to do so by their position in the "interspace." One approach that took up and developed this image is that of the so-called "Masters of Interspaces" by Gernot Wolfram and this author. For cultural managers in international and national contexts today are increasingly acting within interspaces that demand of them an expanded organisational, aesthetic and political scope for thought and action. Just think of the expansive development of cultural tourism and cultural education on the cultural agenda in many countries.

The same applies in a more fundamental sense with regard to the connectivity of art and culture to social discourses. Here, there is an increasing need for translation and mediation that, for instance, is reflected in cultural management approaches such as community building. The same applies to the interfaces between culture and marketing as well as culture and education, which try out new conceptual and methodological approaches to attract and retain visitors. At the same time, art and culture are (again) gaining in importance in the major lines of social discourse as well as in urban and regional development – especially in times of demographic change, political upheavals and fiscal crises. Promoting sensible –

and culture-friendly – ideas and projects requires critical cultural management. This works together with the actors involved on concise terms and collaboration spaces for art and culture so that they can work in these interdependencies. Often, there is mistrust or scepticism in these fields, such as among many artists who are anxious that their work might be reinterpreted according to efficiency logics. This is precisely where cultural managers can act as transformation ambassadors: Change can then be achieved fairly if it actively acknowledges fears, mistrust, scepticism and worries rather than denying or negating them.

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In all these and other fields, cultural managers can play an important role by taking their position as “Masters of Interspaces” seriously. With this position and in the mentioned contexts of action, the gap in the discussion that has been going on for years about whether cultural managers should rather be “servants” or “shapers” closes. In the context of an enabling “interspace management,” which is equivalent to “contemporary change management,” they are both.

Present-day practical examples of such “interspace managers” are, for example, the actors who develop strategies and methods in various institutes within the scope of the Federal Cultural Foundation’s 360° Fund for Cultures of the New Urban Society that show how they – in terms of topics and personnel – have the potential to help shape the new urban society. Another example are the numerous coordinators who have been permanently hired to implement the planned transformation measures after cultural development processes in Düsseldorf, Nuremberg or northern and southern Thuringia.

#### **What does this mean for cultural management training?**

Not everything, but a lot does need to change, in particular, the basic position. For example, people now speak of “culturally reflexive management” in the study program for cultural management at the University of Basel where they offer focuses, for example, in the fields of “innovation and change” or “digital cultures.”

In this context, cultural managers must point out the special value system of cultural work. Art is not created by specifications, but by experimentation, networking and discourse orientation. Since the Enlightenment, these have been the values of Western societies that cannot be allowed to be lost through the imperatives of the creative industries or structural austerity. Instead of constant growth, here the awareness for different uses, transformation of the existing and creation of power through cooperation can be the right pathway.

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Seen thus, culture management is change management, which creates the conditions to bring together the right people so that models emerge that can react constructively to challenges and also so that questions can be asked and not only answers are expected. In addition to the existing cultural management canon, this requires above all the following skills, which should be a focus of training in existing subjects and/or new programmes:

- > Analysis and interpretation skills, because change always requires knowledge and transparency about the issues to be dealt with
- > In this context, also knowledge of qualitative and quantitative research methods
- > Capabilities for conceptual and innovative work and thinking (often, concise suggestions for action must be developed from a plethora of vague ideas)
- > Broad knowledge of participatory and creative methods in working with small and large groups
- > Basics in the field of moderation and mediation
- > Cooperation management as change management
- > Sufficient knowledge of cultural policy (decision-making) structures and of key issues of (cultural) transformation, in particular digitisation
- > Knowledge in the field of international cultural management (cultural dialogue/transfer, transnational cooperation, etc.), such as that demonstrated by the successfully launched international Master's programme in Arts and Cultural Management by Leuphana University and the Goethe-Institut.
- > Indication of possibilities for specialisation in the knowledge society.

This is merely an initial, incomplete collection of topics likely to gain in importance in cultural management education. For all its complexity and challenges, the transformation of the cultural sector and its interwoven fields is first and foremost an opportunity to reinvent cultural management in the necessary places and to give it a clear position in the field of culture.

*Dr Patrick S. Föhl is the founder and director of the Netzwerk Kulturberatung in Berlin as well as an international cultural development planner, cultural management trainer and university lecturer. In addition, he regularly publishes in the fields of cultural policy and cultural management and is an advisor in the Education and Discourse Division of the Goethe-Institut. More at [www.netzwerk-kulturberatung.de](http://www.netzwerk-kulturberatung.de)*

Photo: Natalka Diachenko

Translation: Faith Ann Gibson  
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