

**Craft and
Folk Arts
Gastronomy
Music**

City of X

**Film
Literature
Design**

Transforming a cultural strength
into place brand success

**CITY
NATION
PLACE**

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Introduction

The reality is that a lot of what makes your city a great place to live could be just as applicable to your neighbours. Quality of life, work-life balance, your community... told in isolation, it's easy to end up with a narrative that sounds remarkably similar to other place brands.

Of course, it's more complex than that. The raw ingredients might look the same on paper, but the way they come to life in any given city brings the unique flavour. It's just that sometimes you need a new lens to help your assets coalesce in your storytelling.

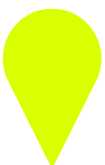
At least, that was the conversation that we were having with our Advisory Group that kicked off this research report: How can cities use a cultural strength to elevate their storytelling?

It became clear that there are a number of cities who are already doing just that through the UNESCO Creative Cities Network [UCCN]. From June to August 2025, we interviewed city leaders from sixteen UNESCO Creative Cities, all of whom have been recognised for a strength in one of a range of creative fields: Crafts and Folk Art; Design; Film; Gastronomy; Literature; and Music. Some are at the very beginning of their journey, whilst others have been on this road for well over a decade. But all of them have embraced an aspect of their culture as a core pillar within their strategy to engage stakeholders, highlight the uniqueness of their community, and amplify their place brand storytelling.

A quick disclaimer: We are not affiliated with UNESCO in any capacity. As the international forum for place brand practitioners, we are interested in seeing how cities can leverage their culture more effectively in their place brand strategy. Whilst this report will touch on some of the specific pros and cons of the UNESCO designation itself, we believe that the learnings from the featured cities are widely applicable. There is just as much to learn if you want to amplify something as niche as skateboarding or flower arranging as there is for music, gastronomy, or any of the UCCN creative fields.

If the passion and energy is there in your community, then you can absolutely leverage that to put your city on the map – with or without UNESCO accreditation to go alongside it.

We hope you find this report valuable as you develop your own strategies.



The work for this toolkit was carried out over a three-month period, supported by our City Nation Place Champions and with the direction from the City Nation Place Advisory Group. We'd like to thank them for their support, as well as to thank all the places who agreed to be interviewed for sharing their experiences and helping us bring this report to life.

What do we mean by ‘City of X?’

Over the course of this research, we interviewed sixteen cities from around the world to discover how and why they decided to pursue a UNESCO Creative City designation. For some, it was about articulating a unique selling point that would give their communications differentiation. For others, it was about lifting up the transformational work happening in their community or celebrating their history. For others still, it was an opportunity to energise specific sectoral development. All have seen benefits in all these areas to one degree or another.

Across our research, a pattern began to emerge – one of shared learnings, of pitfalls to avoid, and of the essential ingredients to success. Perhaps unsurprisingly, many of these also mirror those we commonly speak about regarding place branding more generally.

Throughout the report, we’re going to be exploring how these cities have become a ‘City of X’ – whether that ‘X’ is gastronomy, music, film, or more. However, it is important to begin by noting that how and where this intersects with the city brand and marketing varies in each instance.

For London, Ontario, for example, music is foundational to everything they do. Festivals are front and centre in their tourism offer, their musicians are leading on London’s climate crisis communications, and music is even re-shaping policy decisions across the city. Being a music city is at the core of their brand identity.

However, London is amongst the more unusual cities that we spoke to: for most cities, their cultural strength sat as a core pillar within their strategy, but not as their full place brand platform.

Take Auckland, for example, for whom being a City of Music serves as a proof point of their place brand values. The city brand strategy is centred around four core ideas: the importance of their Māori culture; celebrating their multicultural population; the complementary contrast between urban and natural environments; and being a ‘playground for ideas.’ With a diverse, international, and thriving music scene, music functions as a way to spotlight these values and surface them to a new audience.

“The designation is wonderful because our music offering in Auckland is really a microcosm of the place brand,” explained Clare Barker, Head of Brand & Creative at Tātaki Auckland Unlimited.

“Everything that’s central to our place brand is reflected in our music offering.”

Helsinki have taken a similar approach to being a City of Design. Design thinking is baked into the government’s service delivery, but when it comes to communications, ‘design’ serves as another tool in their toolkit – something to be wielded when appropriate and sidelined when it is not.

“Design will always be one of the strands that Helsinki Partners promote, but it varies. Sometimes it’s the main attraction, at others it’s among a basket of city highlights,” explained Hanna Harris, Chief Design Officer for the City of Helsinki.

For just one of the cities we spoke to – Cape Town – the designation served more to capture a moment in time. “Experience has taught me that titles alone don’t guarantee lasting impact,” shared Enver Duminy, CEO of Cape Town Tourism. “For some, they become fleeting campaigns; today music, tomorrow design, next year something else. Without consistent commitment, even the best ideas risk fading.”

Whilst still holding the title of ‘City of Design,’ it’s not an active part of Cape Town’s communications or stakeholder engagement. However, the legacy impact of the strategy can still be felt within the city, from the relationships that were forged to the design thinking that continues to help organisations across Cape Town respond more effectively to their challenges.

These four cities demonstrate the breadth of approaches that cities have taken to weaving culture into their strategy, but the reality is that there are as many different right answers to this problem as there are cities embedding culture in their strategy.

Over the course of this report, we’re largely going to be focusing on how being a City of X can serve as a pillar within your strategy to galvanise stakeholders and articulate a shared vision for your community alongside a broader place brand strategy. However, it absolutely can be foundational to your place identity if you want – just check out the case study with Tourism London to see how they’ve woven music through every aspect of their brand!

With that caveat in mind – what are the essential ingredients for success?

Let’s dive in.

Ingredients for a successful 'City of X' strategy

1.

It has to be authentic to your place brand DNA.

Spotlighting your culture can be an extraordinarily valuable way to articulate your unique selling point. London, Ontario, for example was struggling to differentiate itself without a clear geographic or cultural landmark to promote – and being known as 'the Forest City' wasn't any help in expressing why visitors should put London on their itinerary. Launceston also acknowledged how positioning itself as a City of Gastronomy has helped to put the region on the map; the CEO of Launceston's airport has also acknowledged how beneficial it has been to have a clear articulation of why you should fly to Tasmania via their airport over Hobart's.

However, as with all place branding, you can't create something out of nothing. Your cultural strength should be rooted in your history, in the contemporary experience of your place, and in your vision for the future. Rather than creating something from scratch, it's about finding a new way to re-frame the work that's already being done in your city.

"[Literature] is embedded in our DNA, and we took it for granted for a long time," explained Petra Stuček, CEO of Ljubljana Tourism. "We needed to embed it into our storytelling so we could see it in a fresh light."

Cities find success where the narrative they want to share sits at the intersection of their history and their aspirations, and that tells a story of who you are, where you've come from, and where you're going. Lean into what makes you different, but if it's inorganic to your community then you'll be fighting an uphill battle every step of the way.



[Literature] is embedded in our DNA, and we took it for granted for a long time. We needed to embed it into our storytelling so we could see it in a fresh light.

Petra Stuček
CEO
Ljubljana Tourism

2.

Identify and engage your stakeholders early and often.

Once you've identified the cultural strength you want to put your weight behind, you now need to do the work to see if you have the energy in your community to see the strategy through to completion. This is vital both in terms of understanding what is already in place and whether your stakeholders see the value in developing this unified, cultural strategy.

The teams at Design Core Detroit and Tourism London both stressed the importance of mapping your existing ecosystem to develop a full picture of the events and policies that are already shaping this cultural experience for residents, visitors, and investors. As well as identifying strengths and weaknesses, this allows you to prioritise which stakeholders are most relevant or influential in delivering this strategy so you can target your efforts accordingly.

"If you look at the UNESCO Creative City designations, we could have been awarded City of Gastronomy or Literature or any of them," said Kathryn Davis, CEO of Visit West, Bristol and Bath, "but it was as a City of Film that there was the collective vision and energy to push us over the line."

Susan Hayes, City of Literature Convenor for the City of Hobart, shared a similar sentiment with us: "You need to get enough people on board with this journey before you've even started, to make sure you've got the passion and commitment to see it through. In the early stages, I think it's really all about information dissemination and communicating with your sector stakeholders, so that as a community, everyone is invested."

Identifying passionate, engaged ambassadors who can speak to different areas of your community and your chosen sector is essential to developing the critical mass of support needed to get your 'City of X' strategy off the ground.



You need to get enough people on board with this journey before you've even started, to make sure you've got the passion and commitment to see it through.

Susan Hayes

City of Literature Convenor

City of Hobart

3.

Chart a path forwards.

Once you've got alignment and support behind your vision, you need to develop an iron-clad north star for your strategy – a clear articulation of your ambitions that resonates with your stakeholders and provides a framework to help you move forwards.

Detroit's strategy, for example, originally emerged from the need to have a roadmap out of the 2008-09 economic recession, and the need to better support the creative industries. By working with business leaders from across Michigan, they were able to define where the city was struggling the most, and what resources were needed to fill those gaps – an activity that ultimately became the foundation of their City of Design positioning.

New Zealand's Whanganui also invested a year to work with its community to understand how the design industry was perceived in the city and where the challenges and opportunities were.

"It was a really fruitful process to go through," explained Dr Emma Bugden, Manager, Whanganui UNESCO City of Design, Whanganui District Council. "It sparked really valuable conversations and got us thinking in new ways about who we were as a city and who we wanted to be."

Thorough research is essential. The future of your city – and your chosen creative sector – needs to be co-created with your community, not imposed down from the top.



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Dr Emma Bugden

Manager, Whanganui UNESCO City of Design
Whanganui District Council

4.

Put your money where your mouth is.

It's not enough just to say that you're a City of Film or of Music. You have to be able to touch, feel, and see this strength across your city.

You can see this ethos reflected in the redevelopment of the main street in Dunedin in New Zealand. As the council's urban design team were looking to revitalise the street, there was an opportunity to bring Dunedin's literature to life tangibly in a public space. Nicky Page, Director – City of Literature for Dunedin City Council, and her team worked to source relevant literature quotes that would connect with their physical location. These have now been chiselled into stone slabs, ensuring that literature is indelibly engraved in the experience of Dunedin.

However, this isn't to say that you need a huge team to be able to deliver hundreds of projects that will support your strategy. Dunedin's City of Literature team is made up of just two people – but they've found success in acting as a focal point to direct the strategic vision.

"Really, we're a conduit; we help facilitate and uplift other projects rather than try to deliver a lot of the programming ourselves," shared Nicky. "When people want to collaborate, they'll talk to us about how we can add something that hopefully makes the project a bit more special."

This is just one example of how the cities we spoke to are delivering really impactful projects around their chosen focus. Perth in Scotland have invested in kilns and dark rooms to shoulder what can be prohibitively high costs to entry in certain crafts. Ljubljana in Slovenia have opened little libraries within their smaller pocket parks. Frutillar in Chile have launched a program that interviews creators from all walks of life to showcase the diversity of creative outlets being championed within the city.

We don't want to say that budget isn't an issue. It is, of course it is. But you certainly don't need a huge budget to deliver impactful programming. With creative thinking and the right partnerships in place, it's amazing to see what cities are able to achieve.



When people want to collaborate, they'll talk to us about how we can add something that hopefully makes the project a bit more special.

Nicky Page

Director – City of Literature
Dunedin City Council

5.

Be prepared to solve the logo challenge.

Logos are seemingly one of the endless challenges for place branders and place promoters. While you do need a coherent and consistent visual identity, you have to circumvent the naysayers who will accuse you of 'wasting money on a logo.' Likewise, there's also the risk of weakening the impact of your visual identity if you have too many conflicting logos.

"Initially we tried to blend the [two] brands, but it just didn't work from a creative perspective. We have yet to find consensus in how our place branding evolves creatively, or we'll end up feeding what has already become a logo fest," shared Chris Griffin, CEO of Northern Tasmania Development Corporation, when we asked how Launceston's City of Gastronomy identity sat within their existing communications.

On the one hand, having too many logos creates confusion and dilutes the impact of your overall place brand positioning. On the other, having a specific identity for your creative sector can also be very powerful when it comes to asking others to own and amplify the visual identity in their own work.

Whanganui have had lots of discussion on how the City of Design strategy should sit within the visual identity for the city, ultimately landing on it existing as a supporting brand to the city's overarching identity. However, in doing so, they have facilitated designers and creative organisations within Whanganui who want to leverage the city's heritage in their own work through this.

"We wanted to make sure that the brand is something that offers a tangible way for businesses and organisations in the city to connect with, and leverage, being a City of Design and feel proud of that," explained Whanganui District Council's Emma Bugden. "For example, our City of Design logo is a free-to-use, downloadable brand that anyone can use alongside their product or service as long as they sign up to a set of values and principles that have been agreed to by our community."



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Dr Emma Bugden

Manager, Whanganui UNESCO City of Design
Whanganui District Council

6.

Don't be just another vanity project.

However, as with all place branding, your 'City of X' strategy should be so much more than a logo. Done correctly, it should serve as a platform for long-term growth and development – and the ripple effect of your work should deliver results for far more than your chosen creative sector.

London, Ontario, is using their City of Music work to drive policy changes that will benefit all residents. Ljubljana and Dunedin are building civic pride by finding new ways to retell the stories of their community back to residents. Helsinki is delivering better, design thinking-led services for residents. Hobart, Bristol, and Whanganui are all investing in capacity and skills development in the community.

But beyond that, the shared language and energy also provides a mechanism to address the social challenges your community is facing.

"We were granted UNESCO City of Literature status in part because we've got this brilliant literary history – the first MA in creative writing in the country (first students Ian McEwan and Kazuo Ishiguro), the first English-language book ever written by a woman anywhere in the world was written in Norwich, first city to adopt the Public Libraries Act – all this great legacy," shared Alice Kent, UNESCO City of Literature Manager for Norwich. "But we also have a literacy attainment rate at key stage two that's 8% below the national average in writing and 4% for reading. The City of Literature designation can be a lever to help us mobilise change around literacy within the community and link activities across the city together."

Like Norwich, Hobart is also using their City of Literature status to deliver the support needed to raise their literacy levels up to the national average. Launceston is working with their private sector partners to adopt more sustainable practices and track the reduction in emissions – whilst also building food literacy across the community. In recognition of low academic performance across the region, Frutillar pioneered an innovative new approach to education to make maths, language, and science classes more creative. Perth is championing community wellbeing by using craft as an inlet for greater mindfulness.

We talk a lot about how a great place to live is a great place to visit and invest. While place brand teams all around the world are rising to the challenge and delivering a stronger future for their community, it's interesting to see how a clearly defined, engaged stakeholder group can focus energies around a City of X strategy to deliver wider benefits.



The City of Literature designation can be a lever to help us mobilise change around literacy within the community and link activities across the city together.

Alice Kent

UNESCO City of Literature Manager
Norwich

Potential pitfalls and how to avoid them

There's a lot more to be learned in the more detailed write-ups we've included of cities who are taking particularly interesting or different approaches to their City of X strategy. But while we've focused primarily on the opportunities up until this point, it's also important to note that, as with any long-term strategy, it is not without its challenges either.

With that in mind then, what are the common pitfalls to be avoided?

Lack of clarity

Firstly, what do you mean by your cultural assets? When you say music, do you mean all music, or are you anchoring it in a particular genre? When you say literature, are you including oral storytelling? Design in particular can be extremely nebulous – as Design Core Detroit's Bonnie Fahoome highlighted, does design mean art? Architecture? A way of thinking?

You have to be clear about what story you want to tell, because if you can't articulate it, then your community-facing partners won't be able to either: "The challenge for us is that if international media ask what it means to be a UNESCO City of Gastronomy, it's difficult for our stakeholders to clearly explain," outlined Anders Nyland, CEO at Visit Bergen.

Inadequate governance

Secondly, who 'owns' the brand? Where does it sit amongst the existing brand work for the city? Who funds it? Are you a facilitator and focal point for the ambitions, or are you a key actor driving the strategy forwards? Across all of our interviews, the need for good governance was clear, and several of our interviewees highlighted that they felt they would have had a smoother journey if these answers had been defined before they embarked on a specific cultural sector focus.

Liverpool, for example, has long been known for its music, and while they've seen this amped up in recent years (hosting Eurovision being a primary example), it took them some time to put the energy behind the designation. "There was a big marketing opportunity there that we never took advantage

of in the first few years," admitted Kevin McManus, Head of UNESCO City of Music at Culture Liverpool / Liverpool City Council. "We should have gone all out in getting the messaging right and involving the venues, but it just didn't happen. Firstly, because we didn't have anyone in a full-time role to lead the work. And because in 2015 we were five years into a and the national government's austerity measures – there were other financial priorities for the council."

Poorly defined remit

Who is covered by the designation? 'City' can be a bit misleading as the word can exclude those living on the outskirts. Launceston, for example, struggled to engage regional partners who didn't see themselves as part of the 'city.' But on the flip side, Dunedin have found a real strength in positioning themselves as a literary centre for all of New Zealand – yes, the title belongs to the city, but all New Zealanders are invited to engage.

Additionally, there is a risk of alienating people who don't see themselves as part of that creative sector. Poppy Jarratt, Programme Officer for City of Craft and Folk Arts at Perth & Kinross Council, noted that in comparison to a focus like 'design,' "craft is inherently inclusive. Everyone's got a friend or a grandmother who can knit – it's something that people can see themselves as part of."

Continual education is needed to showcase the ways in which this strategy can deliver benefits for all residents. You have to ensure that there are touchpoints that involve as much of your community as possible – whether or not they're a musician, an architect, or a chef.

The strategy hinged on a single person

It might take just one person to propose a 'City of X' strategy, but it takes a village to deliver it. For several of the cities that we spoke to, their strategy had lost momentum when the key individual who had been championing the City of X designation left their role.

In order to deliver a strategy that makes a long-term impact, it needs to be baked into your governance in some capacity. That means making sure that it's written into job roles and that performance is measured against the outcomes delivered by the approach. If you want this to be a strategic priority for your city, then you have to put the structures in place to enforce that – with or without that key individual driving the strategy forwards.

Lack of funding

A long-term strategy needs long-term commitment to make it work – and that means funding. You have to have the budget holders invest in this strategy to be able to deliver it, whether that's council funding or philanthropic donations.

Auckland, for example, have limited funding which means that they're only able to activate the brand in limited bursts. Liverpool's designation has likewise been a slower burn to get things moving, as political priorities have moved on. And Cape Town's political leaders have pivoted entirely to throw their weight behind new monikers.

You don't need to have every action charted out for the next decade, but you do need to be able to draw a picture of what the city will look like in five-, ten-, and twenty-years' time as a result of this strategy. If you can tell a compelling story of what the future can look like, then it's easier to get influential stakeholders to back your strategy. Once you've done that, you can identify easy wins that will show short-term progress to win over more support for your strategy; festivals, for example, are a great way of showing how your specific creative focus can increase footfall, deliver sales for local businesses, and foster community pride.

Having a clear understanding of your purpose – your north star – also makes it easier to identify what the most relevant and impactful KPIs are to demonstrate your impact – something which is essential to securing future funding. Traditional economic metrics such as heads in beds or foreign direct investment don't show the full picture of the social good that you can deliver for your place. It isn't as simple to showcase how your actions deliver growth against these softer or brand-led metrics, but it's vital to demonstrating your success.

To UNESCO or not to UNESCO?

We firmly believe that you don't need to pursue a UNESCO designation to see these benefits.

As City of Helsinki's Hanna Harris said, "Design is the narrative that penetrates our work, but it's not specifically UNESCO design. It's design itself – the UNESCO designation is a subcategory under the overall design umbrella, if you wish."

However, it would be remiss of us not to address the elephant in the room – what does the UNESCO Creative Cities designation itself deliver for your city?

At the end of the day, this may or may not be something that will deliver value for your city. You will need to weigh up the individual advantages and disadvantages against your own specific priorities to see whether this is an avenue worth pursuing.

Regardless, the lessons we have learned from the cities we spoke to on how to identify and engage your stakeholders, advocate for your value, and build community pride will be valuable for all.

PROS

It legitimises your claim. It's one thing to say that you're a City of Music, and another to have it officially recognised by one of the world's most prominent organisations. This can be particularly beneficial when selling your strategy to stakeholders and can become a point of pride in your community by reinforcing the idea that you're already doing something right.

It provides accountability. It's much easier to back away from a home-grown internal strategy than it is to pull the plug on being a UNESCO Creative City – the designation is for life and requires regular reporting to demonstrate how you're continuing to deliver against your ambitions.

You can access the Creative Cities Network. UNESCO hosts regular meetings for their member cities, and almost every person we spoke to was quick to praise the benefits of learning from cities going through a similar journey to yourself.

As well as knowledge sharing, the relationships built through the UNESCO Creative Cities Network offers opportunities for your artists, musicians, crafters, and chefs to participate in festivals or events held by fellow Creative Cities.

CONS

Comparatively to the UNESCO World Heritage sites, the Creative Cities aren't as well recognised by a consumer audience. Across the cities we spoke to, several felt that it was attractive to Asian audiences, but it was equally clear how much work was needed to explain what the UNESCO designation entailed to key audiences.

Whilst it provides external accountability, it also comes with obligations, such as reviewing future bids from hopeful cities looking to secure a Creative Cities designation.

It doesn't come with any funding. And one of our interviewees highlighted that not only were they still responsible for securing the funding for their strategy, but also creative organisations and businesses assume you may have UNESCO funding to distribute to support their projects.

You can only hold one UNESCO Creative Cities title, and while they're broad categories, they're also prescriptive; you may not feel like one of the seven titles available is suitable to your needs.



Cory Crossman

Director

London Music Office & UNESCO City of Music Focal Point
Tourism London (Ontario, Canada)



London, Canada

City of Music

UNESCO City of Music since November 2021

London, Ontario, was a city searching for a unique identity. They didn't have the Rocky Mountains or the CN Tower or even a coastline – and their moniker 'The Forest City' was vague and uninspiring.

London needed something that would put them on the map and that their stakeholders could rally around. They found it in their music community.

"We've got a history of developing incredible engineers, producers, festivals, musicians," explained Cory Crossman, Director, London Music Office & UNESCO City of Music Focal Point for Tourism London. "We're an educational hub for music, and that's become our new identity."

Building on a 2013 music strategy for the city, Cory Crossman was originally hired as the Music Officer, making London the second city in Canada (behind Toronto) to establish a Music Office. And in 2019, the Music Office and their partners began the process of applying to become a UNESCO City of Music as an opportunity to separate London from other cities in Canada with their own music strategies.

The Music Office's role is to create the conditions for the industry to thrive, including grassroots development, music tourism, talent incubation, sound policies, and more. The focus and commitment to becoming a UNESCO City of Music has been integral in shaping the future of the city. For example, until the Music Office's intervention, only a handful

of venues had the ability to play live music on commercial patios grandfathered into their operating license. With the new focus of living and breathing music, the team were able to push through legislative changes to the sound policy to allow music to be played on patios and, more recently, the City of London Special Events team adjusted the Special Events Manual to better support live music. On top of this, they host a City of Music conference each year to build awareness and explore new opportunities for policy developments.

"We're seeing discussions on how do we own this identity more? How do we do more?" shared Cory. "There are pieces I can point to like that sound by-law for our festivals that came from being a UNESCO city. I had been hitting my head against the wall for eight years trying to change this antiquated by-law, and it really took becoming a City of Music. The City of London did a full sweep of all our special events policies, because it's cited that as a UNESCO City of Music, we need to have policies that balance the needs of citizens and the needs of industry."

Now, instead of doing readings from a default of 100 feet (30 metres) out from the festival grounds, the team establish a perimeter to do readings from which changes based on events and what might impede someone's quality of life on a case-by-case basis.

Policy is one major area in which the team are working, but it's by no means the only weapon in their



The infrastructure around sport is widely understood. So are the benefits. We need to learn from that so the community can buy in to our music in the same way they do for our sports.

arsenal. A number of intentional, targeted actions are ensuring that music is baked into the London experience, making sure that music is truly the calling card of the city.

“The brand identity is a key piece of it,” shared Cory. “The more you can shape that narrative around the value proposition and the identity that comes with it – that’s what’s going to change our city.”

Musicians have been featured on the cover of Tourism London’s visitor guide in 2024 and 2025, the team’s largest and most reliable marketing asset. Even the hold music for the City of London’s phone lines is sourced from local artists. And a number of grassroots developments that fall under the Music Office’s remit are ensuring that London is a thriving hot spot for live music and up-and-coming musicians.

Integrating a proposition such as City of Music so thoroughly through every touchpoint takes a staggering amount of stakeholder buy in and support. Prior to adopting the City of Music positioning, London already had a Business of Music committee that met monthly to discuss new initiatives, projects, and common challenges. This group provided the growing ground for the City of Music brand and provided early support behind the strategy.

In addition, the city undertook a comprehensive mapping exercise – a music census – to understand what assets they had available. This also served the dual function of providing a benchmark against which growth could be measured and also to identify key stakeholders who should be engaged in the strategy.

“I think that’s the first thing – understanding what makes you different and then leaning into it,” explained Cory. “There’s this idea that because we’re a mid-size city that there’s not much happening here. But in fact, there’s a lot more happening in our city than many other places – more accessible programming, more accessible events.”

The need to rebuild and redefine the future of cities post-COVID has been an unexpected boon in bringing stakeholders on board, highlighting

the importance of having a strong downtown core complete with a robust cultural offering.

Alongside this, their music strategy is providing the throughline to their sustainable development messaging and actions. While London, Ontario, isn’t unusual in having an established climate emergency action plan, where they differ is how they’ve rooted their communications in their musical identity, using musicians to amplify their message. For example, The Watershed Project saw the city’s poet laureate writing a poem about climate action. Musicians then performed the poem over the top of a score composed by local musicians.

“It’s not some far flung crisis,” noted Cory. “It’s a crisis that impacts our day-to-day, and music is helping us to tell that story to our residents.”

The policy developments that are being powered by the designation are also helping to build a more sustainable and resilient community. One area that has seen substantial improvements has been transportation. If festival or concert goers can’t get back from a live music event easily and affordably, that hinders the ability for people to attend. Surge pricing in taxi fares can substantially increase the cost of attending live music – but as Cory explained, if there’s an issue for music, there’s also an issue for the general public.

Through this, music becomes a lens to identify broader issues facing the community and develop solutions that provide benefits that are felt beyond the initial audience of musicians and music goers.

“The idea is that music is at the forefront kicking the door down, and then all the other creative industries benefit.”

As a final point, Cory shared how his keynote speech at this year’s anniversary of the designation will be focussed on the importance of treating music like sport. “The infrastructure around sport is widely understood. So are the benefits. We need to learn from that so the community can buy in to our music in the same way they do for our sports.” 📍



Bonnie Fahoome
Co-Executive Director
Design Core Detroit



Detroit, USA

City of Design

UNESCO City of Design since 2015

Design Core Detroit's origins reside in the 2008/09 economic downturn. With industry in crisis and people filing for bankruptcy, business leaders from across Michigan came together to develop an economic recovery plan for the region, with particular focus on supporting the creative sector.

At the time, there were very few support organisations or accelerators for the creative sector – or indeed, at all! Design Core Detroit was launched to fill this gap – a move that set Detroit on their journey to becoming a UNESCO City of Design. Initially envisioned as a physical incubator, the new membership organisation partnered with the College for Creative Studies to secure a space in the centre of Detroit. However, as the organisation continued to develop, the team expanded their reach into elevating and leveraging creativity in neighbourhoods throughout the city for economic development and community development.

When the city earned the UNESCO City of Design designation, the Design Core Detroit team spent 18 months gathering input from over 1000 Detroiters to craft a long-term strategic plan and to understand what makes Detroit's design history unique. Through this, they determined that their top priorities were talent development for creatives, advocating for ways to incorporate design into policy, and promoting more investment in design.

Therein came the first challenge, because 'design' itself is quite nebulous. Is design a colour? A building? A product? Design Core argue that for their city, 'design' is both a process and a practice; essentially, it's about identifying new ways of doing things. But that creates its own challenges to communicate that to internal and external audiences and to keep their strategy focused.

"Ultimately, it was decided that with Detroit's unique demographic and history, we can be a real leader in inclusive design," shared Bonnie Fahoome, Co-Executive Director of Design Core. "We want to uplift design as a process. And that means asking the hard questions, like who gets to be a designer? Who's at the table? Who speaks up and who is heard when it comes to designing communities and spaces?"

Alongside the work fulfilling their obligations to UNESCO, Design Core operates a membership network for companies and freelancers across all disciplines, from the built environment to product design to visual design. They also run public programming within the design sector, including the Month of Design which is co-created with the community and Drinks by Design, a networking opportunity four times a year that also serves as an opportunity to showcase the city's talent.



We're figuring out now how we can package assets for people to use so that everyone can take ownership and pride in the designation.

For Design Core, these three workstreams of sector development, advocacy, and attracting people to the city could be very powerful working together. A process is being undertaken to break down those silos to understand how public programming can drive benefits for business and how businesses can promote and support the City of Design work. That said, each has a different strategic purpose, with different funders and stakeholder groups. And, like many non-profits, Design Core has to balance continued growth of programming and increasing community and economic value with the realities of capacity and resource constraints.

One challenge Design Core are still grappling with is how to find a balance between the softer and harder outcomes that their work delivers. For example, a key strand of their work looks at social design, and uplifting the amazing stories of members of the community who are stepping up to solve social challenges in their area. However, the benefits and reporting around social impact are very different to economic metrics such as an increase in business sales or number of hotel room nights due to a design-based event. Further work is still needed both to reliably identify and track those softer metrics, as well as to educate stakeholders on why those metrics are so important to Detroit's future growth.

To build the capacity needed to continue its trajectory of growth and impact, Design Core is striving to improve data collection and storytelling. The hope is that with a greater understanding of design, the UNESCO designation, and the community benefits of the work, the organisation can attract the necessary investment to keep going. "We've been a City of Design for ten years now. In our immediate network, people celebrate it and are proud of it, but outside that immediate circle, lots of people still don't know about it. And even with those who do know, we've not seen the city take a specific role in championing the designation as a point of pride."

To address this, the team are undertaking an ecosystem mapping exercise to identify which stakeholders should be engaging with the City of Design work. For example, there is no visible reference to 'Detroit City of Design' at any of the city's gateways. Design Core hopes to change that by working with city officials, the airport, the Department of Transportation and others to maximise the brand potential of the designation and ensure that all residents and visitors know about and take pride in the city's design legacy.

"It's meant to be the city's asset," admits Bonnie, "but right now it feels like we have to drive and push it along. We're figuring out now how we can package assets for people to use so that everyone can take ownership and pride in the designation."

As another part of their ongoing community focus, Design Core also convenes quarterly meetings of a Design Economy Council. Originally a Stewardship Board, which provided guidance and support to Design Core, the Council concept, [which was borrowed from a fellow UNESCO City of Design], is now meant to encourage more action and collaboration amongst and across member companies and individuals. Membership has been substantially expanded alongside the council's increased remit. This council now explores new ways that design can act as a driver for economic development, what the sector needs, and how Design Core can support their goals.

Design Core has had most success in engaging stakeholders when they're able to see and articulate the benefits to multiple different stakeholders around a specific programme or platform. For example, the team has launched Design Guides as part of an ongoing advocacy piece to encourage fair wages for creatives. However, small businesses have much smaller margins and often can't see the value in professional design. The Design Guides explain what you actually receive, why it matters, and how you can effectively work with professional designers. As well as being a valuable resource for SMEs, it's also integral to growing the market for designers.



At the end of the day, it's about economic development and you have to be able to point to how that translates to growth an opportunity.

A similar guide has also been created for the real estate sector, looking at the importance of bringing in a designer to guide you through the development of inclusive places and spaces.

Then there's Design Jam, an interdisciplinary product innovation workshop. This was originally started to grow the market for industrial designers in product development, but it's also an invaluable opportunity to educate current and future designers, manufacturers, entrepreneurs, and more on how an inclusive design process leads to better product outcomes for all. The adaptive products theme, for example, invites people with disabilities to the table to help make design decisions and ideate, prototype and test new products. As with the Design Guides, it's easier to communicate the value to stakeholders when an initiative straddles multiple sectors or stakeholder groups and delivers benefits for all of them.

"Design Core Detroit's secret sauce is being able to convene multiple stakeholders in a single conversation and create a product or solution that meets all of those needs," explained Bonnie. "But at the end of the day, it's about economic development and you have to be able to point to how that translates to growth an opportunity. It's often a challenge to quantify the intangible outcomes, but we're learning how to find those numbers and metrics. 📍"



María José Mira
Executive Director
Frutillar Ciudad Creativa



María José Hess
Communications Lead
Frutillar Ciudad Creativa



Frutillar, Chile

City of Music

UNESCO Creative City of Music since 2017

With a population of just under 20,000 people, Frutillar might not be the most obvious choice to be named Chile's first City of Music. But with a vibrant musical history spanning from German choirs to the largest classical music festival in Latin America, Frutillar punches above its weight in the creative sector. The city's creative industries account for around 6% of local GDP – well above the national average of 4.5% – which translates into opportunities for the creative sectors and associated services in Frutillar and the surrounding area.

But the reality is that the city is socially and economically segregated; the majority of the population is concentrated in Upper Frutillar, while Lower Frutillar is the centre of tourism and musical activity, with a smaller population able to benefit from the majority of resources. Frutillar knew that if culture was going to be at the heart of community development, then this disparity had to be addressed. And so, a participatory process was launched with the local community and the musical and creative ecosystem to identify actions to address some of the challenges the city was facing. These actions then became the foundation of their Creative City Agenda and the commitments that Frutillar made upon applying to become a UNESCO Creative City.

In particular, Frutillar has committed itself to the following Sustainable Development Goals: improving local education; enhancing opportunities

for entrepreneurship and employability; developing the local creative sector; promoting social integration; enhancing governance and information management processes; and collaborating with other Creative Cities to put Frutillar and Chile on the international map.

"These initiatives are articulated by Frutillar Ciudad Creativa, an organisation that was born out of the UNESCO Creative City bid and that coordinates the twenty main cultural institutions in Frutillar," explained María José Mira, Executive Director of Frutillar Ciudad Creativa. "And for each of these lines of action, we've developed programs, initiatives, and projects that all seek to advance us towards becoming a more sustainable city."

For example, one of Frutillar's commitments is the improvement of local education. The city faces a number of challenges regarding its student population, including low performance and a lack of teaching teams to meet the demand. In the face of these challenges, it's also difficult to invest the time and resources needed to develop more innovative approaches.

Enter the Creative Learning Programme, a programme that was undertaken with the support of the Creativity, Culture and Education (CCE) and delivered by the Kopernikus School, a local private school. "We wanted to make maths, language,



We're using music in partnership with the other arts to create a new joint venture that will deliver benefits for everyone.

or science classes more creative – like an artist's workshop, or the garage of a rock band," shared María José Mira. The pioneering approach improved student's academic performance whilst also giving them new opportunities to flex their creative muscles. Since its initial inception, the program has been carried out in schools across the region and has even been made available at a national level digitally. Although the program has since been closed, it's legacy continues through the teaching methods of teachers and school leaders across the region.

Another initiative sought to use the arts as a vehicle to promote social harmony between different communities. Frutillar's community is very fragmented, and the neighbourhood and cultural background you belong to is significant in terms of social distinctions people make. The team needed a platform that would provide new opportunities to exchange learnings and experiences between people of different origins.

To meet this need, the team launched 'Sintonía Cultural' (Cultural Tuning). The program interviews creators of all disciplines and backgrounds, which is then broadcast across radio, local television, and social media channels.

However, some of Frutillar's most impactful strategies have been in their place-to-place collaborations, acting as a focal point to champion the creative economies at a national level. Since achieving the UNESCO designation themselves, Frutillar has promoted the creation of the Chilean Creative Cities of Music cluster and today joins forces to apply for funding from the Ministry of Culture, Arts, and Heritage to develop and strengthen its cultural development strategies.

Frutillar has also proposed and coordinated the establishment of a national network. Alongside eight other territories and the Ministry of Culture, Arts, and Heritage, the National Productive Development Corporation, and UNESCO, this network is essential in advocating for national public policies that support the efforts Chilean cities make to position

culture and the creative economies at the heart of sustainable development.

In addition to these national collaborations, Frutillar also promoted a creative tourism programme, financed by CORFO (Corporación de Fomento de la Producción), incorporating the other three cities in the Llanquihue Lake basin to generate new tourism opportunities through the creative identity of each of these cities: Frutillar with music, Llanquihue with crafts, Puerto Varas with cinema, and Puerto Octay with gastronomy. Together, the four cities are pooling their knowledge to create new opportunities for tourism development and support cultural development within the cities, positioning themselves as a creative destination.

"We're working with the tourism organisations for all these cities to promote that not only can visitors experience the natural beauty of Lake Llanquihue, but they can also stay longer and experience traditional arts and crafts in a neighbouring city," outlined María José Hess. "We're using music in partnership with the other arts to create a new joint venture that will deliver benefits for everyone."

At the end of the day, collaboration has been vital to the success of Frutillar's ambitions for their cultural sector development – at a regional, national, and international level. By working with networks on both the micro and macro scale, they're delivering international recognition for both Frutillar and Chile.

"Being a small city can make you fragile, because the stakeholder institutions that support us financially are also very small," shared María José Hess, Communications Lead for Frutillar Creative City. The municipality currently doesn't cover all financial budget for the team's operation – although the Mayor is an important backer of their work. "But we've built strong governance, and we have a shared agenda that we made together as a city which helps give more stability to our work. Even if the local government changes and the new mayor doesn't support our institutions, we still have the backing of the industry." 📍



Chris Griffin
CEO
Northern Tasmania
Development Corporation



Kim Seagram
Chair
FemenTasmania

Launceston, Australia

City of Gastronomy

UNESCO Creative City of Gastronomy since 2021

Launceston has one of the oldest continuously operating breweries in Australia. It is surrounded by incredible farmlands and oceans, and has the legislation to ensure that the food is produced as naturally as possible and with a focus on quality. The indigenous community has been using the area as a virtual cornucopia for tens of thousands of years. But despite that, there wasn't a cohesive vision for the region's agricultural development, and there was no strong history of adding value to their produce to grow the agrifood industry.

To respond to this, an incubator for fermented food and beverages was conceptualised to serve as an economic development driver for the region. The newly minted FermenTasmania team took to the road to meet with other food-business incubators around the world to understand best practice. On this journey, they were advised in Östersund – a UNESCO City of Gastronomy – that it would be beneficial for Launceston to bid for the title too. This idea galvanised the existing working groups and united the stakeholders across the food system to get behind a shared vision for Launceston and Northern Tasmania. FermenTasmania has grown alongside Launceston's Creative City Journey, with the FermentHQ launching in 2025.

At this time, Chris Griffin from Northern Tasmania Development Corporation, Andrew Pitt as Chair of Launceston's Creative City steering group, and

a cast of city and regional champions began to collaborate on developing the Creative City bid. As well as managing funding contributed by the University of Tasmania and the Great Regional City Challenge, this community leadership group has been instrumental in educating stakeholders around what this means for the community.

"It wasn't necessarily a place branding initiative," Chris explained. "The designation isn't a trophy; it doesn't sit in a cabinet to say 'look what we've won'. When you have the designation, all the things you put into your bid... you're now obligated to deliver on those aspirations."

That doesn't mean that the designation hasn't already been very successful in helping to put Launceston on the map. The CEO of the local airport acknowledged how valuable it's been to have a unique selling proposition to encourage people to fly to them rather than to Hobart. Launceston and the Tamar Valley was also named number four in the Lonely Planet's Best in Travel list in 2025, primarily in recognition of their food tourism.

However, it was important for the region that this wasn't seen as a hollow branding exercise. It had to be understood that it aimed to deliver cultural change within their food system. This includes building more sustainable practices in their food production and also addressing food injustice in their community.



Never think that you've just done your communications and everything's fine. Ongoing communication is king.

Tasmania exports 60% of its vegetables across the country, but it also has food deserts in the cities and regions where it's near impossible to buy fresh fruit and vegetables. And if people can't buy them, then they're often missing the culinary literacy needed to cook with them – the generational knowledge is being lost.

"To improve food literacy, we've been advocating for organisations such as School Food Matters, which is a school lunch program that's now being rolled out across the state," shared Kim Seagram, Chair of FermenTasmania

The next phase of work will see the team launching the 'G' symbol – a logo that celebrates Launceston's status as a UNESCO City of Gastronomy and builds community pride in their gastronomy. The aim is to ensure that even the smallest food producer or local café can connect to the designation.

"If you don't have a central agency with a lot of marketing money behind them, you can get very lost in your own city trying to put your brand marks about. So, we want this to be infectious, where other people are able to adopt it and know what it means. And whether you're a local or a visitor, you'll see this G symbol and start to piece together 'ah, these guys are about local food,'" Chris outlined.

To ensure a degree of consistency and quality, the team are bringing together stakeholders from across the food system to develop a document that will create a framework for best practice in Launceston and the surrounding region. To use the 'G' symbol, organisations must first sign up to this pledge, which includes commitments like using Tasmanian produce and running your business sustainably.

Tasmania has a very well-established and respected carbon auditing business, and one of the ambitions is to encourage partners to audit their work to show that they're reducing waste and carbon in order to use the 'G' symbol. And, so far, the food sector is on board.

"The interesting thing is, if we onboard 200 or 300 businesses in the first few years through the auditing system, we can then measure the total impact against UNESCO's Sustainable Development Goals," explained Chris. This can then be translated into a regional dashboard of carbon emissions and waste reduction that the team can report back to UNESCO. "I was testing this idea at a conference recently with other Creative Cities of Gastronomy, and they all sat there and looked at me and said, 'You can do what?' We really think we can do this. And anything we can do to start illustrating change is a total bonus."

However, Chris and Kim are keen to ensure that the 'G' symbol doesn't become just another fighter in the logo arena. Based on their observations, many cities in the Creative City Network have a dual brand, with the local council in the centre, and the creative city positioning sitting as a sub-brand under that. And whilst the team were keen to ensure that they embraced the Gastronomy brand completely, there has been a degree of opposition. "Initially we tried to blend the brands, but it just didn't work from a creative perspective," Chris shared. "We have yet to find consensus in how our place branding evolves creatively, or we'll end up feeding what has already become a logo fest."

Kim also highlighted the importance of getting alignment from all your stakeholders. "Northern Tasmania has multiple council areas, and it took a lot of work initially to explain the vision for the city and region and then to keep the momentum going. Never think that you've just done your communications and everything's fine," Kim advised. "Ongoing communication is king."

This was particularly vital in managing the difference of perspectives between the city council and the surrounding rural councils, who were more prone to feeling that 'City of Gastronomy' wasn't a title that applied to them. However, by continuing to push the importance of the strategy, the team are educating the community and stakeholders in how transformative gastronomy can be for their whole region. 📍



Petra Stuček
CEO
Ljubljana Tourism



Ljubljana, Slovenia

City of Literature

City of Literature since November 2015

Ljubljana is no stranger to UNESCO designations. As well as having their prehistoric pile dwellings listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, the architectural prowess of Jože Plečnik in Ljubljana has been recognised for his contribution to Human Centred Urban Design. Now the city is being recognised for their contributions to Literature – first as World Book Capital (2010) and then as a City of Literature (2015).

The journey to becoming a City of Literature began in government, but the tourism office and the cultural sectors were the first to seize the opportunities that literature presented for their community.

A number of projects were launched to tangibly integrate literature into day-to-day life.

‘Library under the Trees’ took advantage of Ljubljana’s high ratio of green areas per capita to build little libraries in the smaller pocket parks. “The only condition was that people would get there, read there, and leave the book there – so they’d come back,” explained Petra Stuček, CEO of Ljubljana Tourism. “We started with the local offer, and it got very popular. People actually started to read more!” Hotels are even getting in on the action, with many featuring curated bookshelves and reading corners year-round.

An important pillar of the city’s literary infrastructure is Vodnik Homestead (Vodnikova domačija), a vibrant cultural centre dedicated to literature, art, and creative exploration. It hosts literary evenings, reading clubs, workshops, exhibitions, concerts, and festivals such as the Children’s Book Festival, Festival of Engaged Writing, and the December Illustration Fair.

Then there’s ‘Fabula’, a big festival that brings together 60 international literary artists to Ljubljana. Or there’s the themed tours that invite people to follow the lives and legacies of iconic Slovenian authors like France Prešeren or Primož Trubar.

“You’ve probably never even heard of them,” Petra laughed. “And for us – we learn about them in primary school, but that’s not fun. So how do we bring that to life in tourism?”

Ivan Cankar, another of the spotlighted authors, turned out to be quite the rock star for his time, and the Ljubljana Tourism team are able to bring his journey to life through tours. He is also featured in the “Moustache Tour”, recognising that by fluke, he and two other great Slovenian men had equally great facial hair.



It's embedded in our DNA, and we took it for granted for a long time. We needed to embed it into our storytelling so we could see it in a fresh light.

The result? Slovenians both in and out of Ljubljana began to rediscover their cultural heritage and their love of their language and literature. And visitors to the city could also join in this cultural rediscovery.

"It's embedded in our DNA, and we took it for granted for a long time," explained Petra. "We needed to embed it into our storytelling so we could see it in a fresh light."

The bulk of this programming was well-established long before the city applied for the UNESCO designation. While it's a point of pride to have been officially recognised for their literature, the title hasn't changed the way that Ljubljana Tourism operates. Rather, it has complemented and strengthened existing efforts by opening up new opportunities for networking with other UNESCO Cities of Literature, which connects Ljubljana to a broader international environment through literary exchanges, residencies of foreign authors, and participation in international conferences and collaborative projects.

Even prior to being named a City of Literature, the Ljubljana Tourism team were persistent in engaging stakeholders in putting their literature in the spotlight. Alongside yearly meetings with stakeholders and specific working groups, the team prioritise connecting different tourism stakeholders together to ensure there's a strong network across the city.

Another initiative launched by Ljubljana Tourism is LUV Fest, a festival of love, art and wandering. Running from 8th February (Slovenia's national cultural holiday) and ending on 12th March (the Slavic Valentine's Day), the festival celebrates the end of long nights and the arrival of spring through numerous cultural events and a variety of art installations scattered throughout the city. And crucially, it's another opportunity to teach locals to love their cultural heritage.

"The buzzword is love towards us, towards our heritage, and towards our literature," shared Petra. "Through that, we attract locals to a lot of things that they wouldn't otherwise do in February. We didn't invent anything new, we just pushed our partners to be more innovative in between these two dates."

The event has more than 90 partners, with hundreds of events taking place within the month. And it's delivering economic growth for the city too; there's a 61% increase in overnight stays in February 2025 compared to February 2022.

Ultimately, Petra stressed that it was important to be inspired by best practice, but that it has to come from your DNA. Afterall, if the locals are happy, then your visitors will be too. The team run campaigns twice a year specifically aimed for residents to be totally transparent about what new projects or events are opening and how the tourism money is being spent.

Done right, leaning into a strength like your literature can be a powerful mechanism to engage your residents in the value of tourism and to remind them how much there is to love and appreciate about their hometown. ♥



Kathryn Davis
CEO
Visit West, Bristol & Bath

**Visit
West**

Bristol, England

City of Film

UNESCO Creative City of Film since 2017

The inspiration to apply for the UNESCO City of Film designation originally came from Professor Charlotte Crofts at the University of West England – also the brains behind Cary Comes Home, Bristol’s biennial festival celebrating Cary Grant’s roots in the city. A group of stakeholders from across Bristol City Council, academia, the local film industry, and the visitor economy were quickly pulled together for a feasibility assessment. Together, these individuals represented everyone from the production side to those looking at how you could promote Bristol as a film-centric destination.

“If you look at the UNESCO Creative City designations, we could have been awarded City of Gastronomy or Literature or any of them,” said Kathryn Davis, CEO of Visit West, Bristol and Bath, “but it was as a City of Film that there was the collective vision and energy to push us over the line.”

Bristol has been a hub of film production and post-production, for many years, including securing one of Channel 4’s regional Creative Hubs in 2020. With nearly a century of legacy work in the sector - BBC Bristol was established in 1934 and Aardman Animations in 1976 - and with a fast-growing industry valued at £288 million in a 2022 study by University of West England, it was clear there was an opportunity to harness this as a north star to galvanise future development.

For Kathryn and her team, this provided an opportunity to harmonise their place marketing by directing visitors towards iconic film locations within the city, capitalising on the success of TV series such as BBC’s Sherlock starring Benedict Cumberbatch and Martin Freeman.

Alongside place storytelling around the creative and cultural offer a UNESCO City of Film provides, it also offered an opportunity to spotlight and enhance the creative education provision at Bristol’s universities, colleges, and informal education centres. A defining priority for Bristol as a UNESCO City of Film has been increasing targeted support and opportunities for underrepresented talent interested in careers in the film and TV industry. Breaking down access barriers and maintaining a skilled and representative crew base has been critical to the city’s work around their designation.

Central to achievements in this area has been the development of ambitious programmes that build equitable pathways into an industry that can feel closed-off and challenging to navigate. A flagship example is ‘All Set West,’ a bold new skills package designed to power up careers, grow connections and unlock opportunities behind the camera for underrepresented talent across the West of England. This initiative is funded by the BFI National Lottery Places and delivered by Bristol City Council’s Film Services (comprising Bristol UNESCO City of Film,



Cities must have a depth of expertise, heritage and growth potential to enable you to get the designation, so it reflects what is established as well as showing your ambition for the future.

The Bottle Yard Studios and Bristol Film Office). All Set West provides free 'set-ready' training, access to the All Set West Hub – a new, inclusive online community for all kinds of opportunities, events, and resources relevant to new entrants or those progressing through their first few credits - and All Set West Outreach activity being taken into schools, colleges and communities to demystify the industry and widen awareness of careers in the region's fast-growing scripted production sector.

"The designation is the sum of its parts," shared Kathryn. "I think the reason why the City of Film work continues to grow in strength and feels very current is because our strategy isn't static – it grows and evolves over time. It's a designation for life that adapts to local sector and international development aims, and we take it very seriously."

Having held the designation since 2017, Bristol is currently undergoing a process to refresh their strategy for the next 5-10 years – sustaining focus on inclusive access and industry development, as well as supporting cultural placemaking, screen tourism, and fostering meaningful international partnerships. As custodians of the title and its accompanying work programme, Bristol City Council prioritises the designation as a leading creative and strategic asset for the city, nurturing a strong network of academic, industry, and cultural partnerships to maintain momentum and align Bristol UNESCO City of Film with wider city and regional development objectives.

Bristol's success has been in the adoption of the designation as an umbrella brand, representing a multi-faceted, highly evolving sector in a unified and inclusive way. For example, Visit West promote the city's year-round film festival programme to engage visitors and audiences in the breadth of events on offer. Meanwhile, close partners Bristol Film Office and The Bottle Yard Studios offer joined-up support for production teams looking for locations, accommodation for cast and crew, stage space and facilities hire. The different stakeholders across the city understand how their work contributes to Bristol's film prowess, and together they are able to deliver something that is much greater than the sum of its parts.

Although the UNESCO designation has been phenomenal for Bristol in terms of unifying different strands of work across the city into a single proposition, Kathryn was quick to explain that it's essential that the work has to come before the brand or designation.

"Cities must have a depth of expertise, heritage and growth potential to enable you to get the designation, so it reflects what is established as well as showing your ambition for the future. You can't have the aspiration without the legacy," Kathryn explained. 📍



Enver Duminy
CEO
Cape Town Tourism



Cape Town, South Africa

City of Design

World Design Capital 2014 and UNESCO City of Design since 2017

In 2010, Cape Town hosted the FIFA World Cup – and it became the north star for the entire country. Sport is one of the great unifiers, and the World Cup drove a lot of optimism. But when the event finished, that direction and purpose was lost and people were left asking “well, now what?”

After the 2010 World Cup, the Cape Town Partnership (a local placemaking organisation) began working with local government to identify a new unifying initiative for residents and stakeholders. Ultimately, the team set their sights on the World Design Capital, and in October 2011, Cape Town was awarded the title of World Design Capital 2014, giving the city two years to prepare and deliver a year-long programme.

Cape Town Design (CTD), a non-profit company, was created to plan, coordinate, and deliver the WDC 2014 programme. Led by CEO Alayne Reesberg, it was declared an Executive Mayoral priority.

“I’ll be frank – at first, many saw it as a private-sector vanity project,” says Enver Duminy, CEO of Cape Town Tourism. “The common perception was that WDC was about artistic or industrial design from an aesthetic angle. Previous hosts included Torino (2008), Seoul (2010), and Helsinki (2012). But winning the bid made us realise design thinking could be a tool to improve the lives of ordinary citizens.”

The World Design Capital was an opportunity to brand the city in a different way, and challenge the notion that design was just about aesthetics. Instead, they would explore how design and design thinking can influence the ways in which we address social challenges and create opportunities to improve people’s lives.

As a maturing city, Cape Town has legacy issues around unemployment and poverty. The World Design Capital became a vehicle to accelerate projects and to allow for co-creation between the public and private sectors and the community.

For Cape Town Tourism, the challenge was how to leverage the WDC spotlight. From 2012 to late 2013, the organisation engaged hospitality and attraction partners, running onboarding programmes to help them understand the title’s value and how to align, participate, and brand their own initiatives.

Shortly after achieving this title, the City of Cape Town aspired to cement the opportunities it provided by being named a UNESCO City of Design – an accolade they received in 2017.

While the WDC title was for one year, UNESCO City of Design status is permanent, yet it comes without funding to sustain it. And over time, political changes saw the initial energy wane.



Titles alone don't guarantee lasting impact. For some, they become fleeting campaigns; today music, tomorrow design, next year something else. Without consistent commitment, even the best ideas risk fading.

"Experience has taught me that titles alone don't guarantee lasting impact," reflects Enver. "For some, they become fleeting campaigns; today music, tomorrow design, next year something else. Without consistent commitment, even the best ideas risk fading."

Although the city no longer speaks as often about its City of Design status, the legacy remains visible. The Hasso Plattner d-school Afrika at the University of Cape Town, founded in 2015 with support from the Hasso Plattner Foundation, is Africa's first dedicated design thinking institution. It equips corporations, governments, and communities with the mindset and tools to address challenges at both local and systemic levels. As a catalyst for design-led innovation, it continues to shape a more sustainable and equitable future for Africa.

Design thinking is now woven into the fabric of Cape Town, re-shaping spaces, policies, and mindsets. The lessons embedded during the City of Design era still guide how companies and communities respond to challenges.

For Cape Town Tourism, the ongoing challenge is measuring these long-term impacts and understanding the ripple effect on the community. Enver acknowledged that this isn't done often enough, but sees it as essential: demonstrating the enduring value of cultural shifts like design thinking is key to ensuring they outlast their original campaigns. As consumer interests and behaviours evolve, so too must the ways these stories are told and their relevance sustained.

For Enver, titles like UNESCO City of Design can serve as powerful focal points, sparking stakeholder engagement and inspiring new initiatives throughout the year. Yet relying too heavily on a single designation risks narrowing the city's vision.

"People like labels; they want to put things in boxes," he reflects. "But there is no box, and there is no label. We once called ourselves a Destination Marketing Organisation (DMO), but that definition limited us to a narrow set of roles. Now we see ourselves as a DXO, where the 'X' stands for transformation, for refusing to be confined, and for embracing constant reinvention." ♥



Nicky Page
Director – City of Literature
Dunedin City Council



Dunedin, New Zealand

City of Literature

UNESCO Creative City of Literature since 2014

Dunedin's journey to becoming a City of Literature began very organically, conceived by the then Director, Dunedin Public Libraries and embracing community conversations over a number of years. Four key stakeholders came together – with the support of local government – to volunteer their time to develop the bid. With a number of festivals, creative organisations, and the city's university already used to collaborating on different projects, this became a new opportunity for them to support one another and nurture the creative sector more broadly within the city.

"You can't just manufacture an identity like this," explained Nicky Page, Director – City of Literature for Dunedin City Council. "It becomes quite clear if it's not authentic because it's extremely time-consuming and rigorous to deliver on it – you need to have that ground-level support."

For a relatively small city of around 135,000 residents, Dunedin has a surprisingly high level of literary activity, punching well above its weight in terms of numbers of writers and quality of work.

"Obviously we like primarily to offer an opportunity for local writers, but it's also an opportunity for the country. We've collaborated with partners around New Zealand because our work is very collaborative; it's about leveraging the designation to shine a light on what's happening in our creative ecosystem nationwide, to uplift our incredible writers, and to make it easier for new writers to have a career pathway."

One recent initiative saw the team heading to local primary schools alongside Jenny Powell, City of Literature South D Poet Lorikeet, to run creative writing workshops for children. As well as encouraging a love of creative writing in their youngest residents, it also provides an opportunity that the schools aren't resourced to deliver by themselves. The team then publishes little books of the children's creative writing, giving families the opportunity to admire the work of their child and also to encourage children to practise reading the work from other children across the city. The project is helping to ensure the future of Dunedin's literary ecosystem, whilst also giving children the skills they need to thrive and a way to share their own stories.



We do have visitors who come to the city because of the designation on literary tours, and sometimes it even encourages them to live here. But it isn't our first focus. Our first focus is on community wellbeing.

However, with only one other team member working on the City of Literature proposition, Nicky sees their role primarily as a facilitator. The creative community often proposes wonderful ideas to celebrate the designation, which are developed together. And if an idea is unfortunately out of the scope of the team's budget and resources to deliver, they're able to connect the proponents to other organisations or grants to support the idea. They also play an important role in threading the City of Literature story through existing projects, such as supporting free poetry readings and panels at established events and venues and serving tea and coffee afterwards for the community.

"Really, we're a conduit; we help facilitate and uplift other projects rather than try to deliver a lot of the programming ourselves," shared Nicky. "You can't really force something like this; people have to genuinely want to come together and find a way to work collaboratively. So we try not to get in the way of a project, but when people want to collaborate, they'll talk to us about how we can add something that hopefully makes the project a bit more special."

The redevelopment of Dunedin's main street is a perfect example of how the City of Literature designation interacts with the wider city development. With aging infrastructure, the city needed to replace the pipes under the main street, and Dunedin was using this as an opportunity to undertake a larger urban development project. However, as well as making the main street more beautiful and pedestrian friendly, it was also a chance to imprint their literary heritage into the built environment.

The urban development team invited Nicky and her colleague to source literature quotations from local writers that connected with locations scattered along the street. Some of the quotes sourced were quite literally written about a specific spot, and for others the vibe and energy were just perfect for the location. Once identified, they then reached out to the authors of those quotes to request their permission and to remunerate them for their work. These quotes were then chiselled into the stone slabs and laid into the street itself. This helps cement literature as an inescapable part of the experience of Dunedin and provides a new way to uplift the creative culture of the city in a very visible way to residents and visitors.

"The sense of discovery is part of it too," Nicky said. "As they appeared, people were putting photos of them on social media and asking 'did you see this? I just stumbled across it, I can't believe it.'"

At the end of the day, the priority is on the writers, readers, and resident pride – and building the skills that people will need to succeed in the future.

"We do have visitors who come to the city because of the designation on literary tours, and sometimes it even encourages them to live here," shared Nicky. "But it isn't our first focus. Our first focus is on community wellbeing." 📍



Poppy Jarratt
UNESCO Programme Officer
Perth & Kinross Council



Perth, Scotland

City of Craft and Folk Arts

UNESCO Creative City of Craft and Folk Arts since 2021

Located in the heart of Scotland, Perth served as one of the country's primary market towns since the medieval era. By the early 1500s, the city had come to be known as a 'craftis toun' – craft town – a reputation that it has retained throughout the centuries. This heritage has had a lasting impact on the town, from the shape of the streets to the breadth and diversity of their contemporary artisans.

Perth & Kinross Council and Culture Perth and Kinross wanted to bring that story to life for a modern audience and showcase how the legacy of their medieval roots continues to influence life in the 21st century.

One such example of this impact is baked into the streets themselves. The geography of Perth is still very medieval, with 'vennels' – little alleyways – cutting between streets. While their modern usage varies in each case, they all link back to a traditional craft as a reminder of the creative trade that originally shaped the city.

Perth applied for the UNESCO City of Craft & Folk Arts designation in 2021, but COVID lockdowns delayed both the opening of the new Perth Museum and any accompanying celebrations of the newly awarded title.

Fast forward to 2023, and the stars aligned to put renewed energy behind the designation, including hiring Poppy Jarratt to take on the role of UNESCO Programme Officer in early 2024, employed by Perth & Kinross Council and seconded to the arms-length organisation responsible for culture and libraries, Culture Perth and Kinross. However, there were a number of challenges when it came to building momentum of the new designation. Starting fresh, there was no social media, no pipeline of projects, no website, and very little understanding at a community level of what being a UNESCO City of Craft & Folk Arts meant for Perth and Kinross. Also, many partners were frustrated that they hadn't seen any of the benefits or opportunities that had hoped for back in 2021.

"It was quite interesting to pick up the designation at that point," admitted Poppy. "I remember starting the Instagram thinking that it was going to be so exciting to get the word out. But it was clear there was disappointment from people who had been excited about the designation announcement in 2021, hoping it would help the craft sector, but hadn't seen much progress."

After a year of awareness raising, procuring the necessary platforms, and building a programme of activity, Perth UNESCO City of Craft and Folk Art were ready to take the next step. And in July 2025, they launched their new website, and a set of creative community assets.



Craft is a brilliant driver of wellbeing – taking that mindfulness and having a moment to yourself away from a screen. It promotes wellness in a way that is very accessible and tangible to people.

These ‘community assets’ are a piece in Perth’s journey to removing barriers to participation in craft making.

“Skills like glass firing and using dark rooms are difficult to learn without huge financial investment,” explained Poppy. “So, let’s situate the tools like kilns in the community and see how people want to use them. We already have a Lend and Mend Hub in AK Bell library in the city centre, and it’s really well used. You can use the tools and material on a pay-for-what-you-use basis, keeping access costs as low as possible – it was a total light bulb moment for me.”

These community assets are installed in Wasps Perth Creative Exchange, a local artist studio and gallery space. Aside from having an induction session, these resources are wholly available to the community; you only pay for the materials or electricity that you use during your booking.

Poppy is also leading on a project to demonstrate how different skills come together within the city to create something special. ‘Two Miles Squared’ is a challenge to create a wearable garment, with all activity taking place within two miles squared of Perth’s central AK Bell Library – including growing the flax to create the material.

“We want to raise conversations around the carbon footprint of the clothes we wear. So, the garment we produce will help us open up conversations about sustainable fashion, as well as the knowledge and expertise of our local artisans.”

The programming of Perth’s UNESCO Creative City designation is focused on celebrating, platforming and creating opportunities for local makers, for providing equitable access to participation in crafts for local communities, and ensuring Perth is an active member of the wider UNESCO Creative Cities Network.

Recent projects include a new display at Perth Museum combining Perth’s printing history with cutting edge technologies to create new printworks, a rebrand of the designation working with UHI Perth students, and a series of free Crafternoon craft workshops. Feasibility planning is also underway for a project which is hoped to increase opportunities for local makers looking to occupy a bricks-and-mortar space in Perth City Centre. The project will be focused on filling empty shops and increasing cultural spaces residents can enjoy, whilst making sure that local artists have the business know-how and support they need to succeed.

At the end of the day, the focus on craft is helping to build community pride and encourage residents to look at their home in a fresh light. From re-framing the vennels as a visible reminder of their historical roots as a craft market town, to tackling unequal access to crafting tools, Perth is making sure that this is a story that everyone can relate to.

“Craft is inherently inclusive. Everyone’s got a friend or a grandmother who can knit – it’s something that people can see themselves as part of,” shared Poppy. “It’s easy to weave it into a pride of place story. You can grab someone on the street and include them through a little craft tutorial at a pop-up stall. And craft is a brilliant driver of wellbeing – taking that mindfulness and having a moment to yourself away from a screen. It promotes wellness in a way that is very accessible and tangible to people.” 💡

Thank you

We would like to thank the following for their participation in the qualitative interviews, some of which have been written up as case studies, but all of which provided us with a picture of the work happening around the world to make places better through their “City of X” designation. The insights they provided were essential in shaping this report.

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Dr Emma Bugden, Manager, Whanganui UNESCO City of Design, Whanganui District Council

Cory Crossman, Music Industry Development Officer & UNESCO City of Music Focal Point, Tourism London

Kathryn Davis, CEO, Visit West, Bristol & Bath

Enver Duminy, CEO, Cape Town Tourism

Bonnie Fahoome, Co-Executive Director, Design Core Detroit

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