

CIVIL SOCIETY AS AN ACTOR OF CULTURAL GOVERNANCE IN IZMİR

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CIVIL SOCIETY AS AN ACTOR OF CULTURAL GOVERNANCE IN İZMİR

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the development of independent cultural initiatives and civic actors in İzmir over the past fifteen years, beginning with the 2009 Culture Workshop organized by the İzmir Metropolitan Municipality—an important turning point in the city’s participatory cultural governance. Grounded in theories of cultural democracy, participatory governance, and community-based cultural practices, the study examines how independent actors navigate institutional settings, build informal infrastructures, and experiment with alternative forms of collaboration.

The first chapter outlines the theoretical and international background, introducing policy frameworks that define culture as a right, a shared resource, and a pillar of sustainable development. It draws on key cultural policy documents by UNESCO and UCLG to position İzmir’s experience within wider global debates on decentralization and civic participation. The second chapter analyzes institutional developments in İzmir, focusing on the municipality’s role in fostering participatory mechanisms and collaborative structures. It shows how these have facilitated engagement between public authorities and independent actors, while also encouraging resource-sharing and solidarity among initiatives. The third chapter explores informal collaboration and grassroots cultural production in the post-pandemic context. It investigates how independent actors cope with precarity by creating their own networks, sharing resources, and cultivating mutual support. The concluding section synthesizes the study’s main findings and reflects on possible pathways to strengthen participatory cultural governance in İzmir—focusing on intermediary structures, mentorship models, and more equitable distribution of cultural resources. Ultimately, the thesis positions independent cultural actors as not only artistic producers but also key contributors to a democratic, inclusive, and socially responsive urban future.

Keywords: Civil Society; Independent Cultural Initiatives; Local Governments; Cultural Governance; İzmir

ÖZ

Bu tez, İzmir’deki bağımsız kültürel inisiyatiflerin ve sivil aktörlerin son on beş yıldaki gelişimini incelemektedir. Çalışma, İzmir Büyükşehir Belediyesi tarafından 2009’da düzenlenen Kültür Çalıştayı ile başlayan ve kentin katılımcı kültürel yönetiminde bir dönüm noktası olan süreci temel alır. Kültürel demokrasi, katılımcı yönetim ve topluluk temelli kültürel pratikler kuramlarına dayanan araştırma, bağımsız aktörlerin kurumsal alanlarda nasıl hareket ettiğini, gayri resmî altyapılar kurduğunu ve alternatif işbirliği biçimleri denediğini analiz eder.

Birinci bölüm, kültürü bir hak, ortak kaynak ve sürdürülebilir kalkınmanın temel unsuru olarak tanımlayan teorik ve uluslararası çerçeveyi sunar. UNESCO ve UCLG gibi kurumların kültür politikası belgeleri üzerinden İzmir’in deneyimi, ademi merkezîyetçilik ve sivil katılım odaklı küresel tartışmalarla ilişkilendirilir. İkinci bölüm, İzmir’deki kurumsal gelişmeleri ve belediyenin katılımcı mekanizmalar ile işbirliğine dayalı yapılar kurmadaki rolünü ele alır. Bu yapıların, kamu otoriteleri ile bağımsız aktörler arasındaki etkileşimi kolaylaştırdığı ve inisiyatifler arasında dayanışmayı teşvik ettiği gösterilir. Üçüncü bölüm, pandemi sonrası dönemde bağımsız aktörlerin karşılaştığı kırılgan koşullara karşı geliştirdiği dayanışma, kaynak paylaşımı ve gayri resmî ağlar üzerinden kurulan üretim pratiklerini inceler. Son bölüm, aracı yapılar, mentorluk mekanizmaları ve daha adil kaynak dağılımı gibi unsurlar üzerinden, katılımcı kültürel yönetişimin nasıl güçlendirilebileceğine dair olası yol ve stratejiler üzerine düşünmektedir. Tez, bağımsız kültürel aktörleri yalnızca sanatsal üreticiler değil, aynı zamanda demokratik, kapsayıcı ve toplumsal duyarlılığı yüksek bir kentsel geleceğin kurucu bileşenleri olarak konumlandırır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Sivil Toplum; Bağımsız Kültür İnisiyatifleri; Yerel Yönetimler; Kültürel Yönetişim; İzmir

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AKP:	Justice and Development Party
CCIs:	Cultural and Creative Industries
CSOs:	Civil Society Organizations
DCMS:	UK Government's Department for Culture, Media and Sport
EU:	European Union
İKPG:	İzmir Cultural Pla+form Initiative
İKSV:	İstanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts
İMM:	İzmir Metropolitan Municipality
İZKA:	İzmir Development Agency
İzKF:	İzmir Culture Fund
İZMEDA:	İzmir Mediterranean Academy
İZTO:	İzmir Chamber of Commerce
KABO:	Kendine Ait Bir Oda
NESTA:	National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts
SDG:	Sustainable Development Goals
SMA:	Barcelona's Municipal Archives System
TMMOB:	Turkish Chamber of City Planners
TURKSTAT:	Turkish Statistical Institute
UCLG:	Global Network of United Cities and Local Governments
UK:	United Kingdom

UN:	United Nations
UNCTAD:	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
UNDP:	United Nations Development Program
UNESCO:	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
WIPO:	World International Intellectual Property Organization

INTRODUCTION

Culture acts as a driving force for increased participation and social inclusion. Cultural activities bring people together, create opportunities to connect with others, create social solidarity and harmony, and increase dignity and tolerance among citizens. It has a significant impact on enhancing citizens' quality of life and increases overall wellbeing for both individuals and communities by playing a crucial role in the reduction of poverty and development of strategies to support disadvantaged communities. Culture also helps build social capital for the cities and may serve as a means for good local governance. Culturally rich areas increase urban competitiveness by attracting creative talent and businesses.

UCLG and the EU recognize culture as the “fourth pillar of sustainable development” - the other historical three pillars are the healthy environment, social inclusion and economic growth - and calls on cities and local and regional governments around the world to develop solid cultural policies and include a cultural dimension in every public policy they create as it is a fundamental aspect of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) localization process.¹

“This new approach addresses the relation between culture and sustainable development through dual means: firstly, the development of the cultural sector itself (i.e. heritage, creativity, cultural industries, crafts, cultural tourism); and secondly, ensuring that culture has its rightful place in all public policies, particularly those related to education, the economy, science, communication, environment, social cohesion and international cooperation.”²

Therefore, central and local administrations have increasingly started to incorporate a cultural aspect into their policies.

¹ United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), *Culture Is the Fourth Pillar of Sustainable Development: Policy Statement Approved by the Executive Bureau of UCLG*, November 17, 2010, <https://www.agenda21culture.net/documents/culture-the-fourth-pillar-of-sustainability>.

² For more on this, see: United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), *Culture: Fourth Pillar of Sustainable Development*, [https://www.uclg.org/sites/default/files/9890675406_\(EN\)_culture_fourth_pillar_sustainable_development_eng_0.pdf](https://www.uclg.org/sites/default/files/9890675406_(EN)_culture_fourth_pillar_sustainable_development_eng_0.pdf).

On the other hand, civil society actors serve as crucial stakeholders in shaping cultural policies at both national and local levels. They often serve as both a driving force in designing policies and as a watchdog to make sure those policies get implemented. Through their active participation, they also contribute to the democratization of cultural decision-making processes, ensuring inclusivity, participation, transparency, and accountability.

In this context, İzmir Metropolitan Municipality (İMM) organized the İzmir Culture Workshop in 2009 as the first step towards a cultural breakthrough, aiming to re-position İzmir as an international metropolis of culture, art, and design in the Mediterranean region. The workshop also served as the initial step for the development of a participatory culture strategy for İzmir, bringing together more than a hundred cultural actors, including artists, scholars, cultural managers, designers, private sector professionals, and representatives of civil society engaged in the arts and culture sector.

The main objectives of the Workshop³ were:

- to assess İzmir's current position in the arts and culture sectors of Türkiye, the Aegean, and the Mediterranean region
- to determine the needs and priorities of both cultural producers and citizens in arts and culture
- to enhance the cultural infrastructure and infuse planned vitality into the city's cultural life and events with a holistic approach
- to set a groundwork with the participation of the civil society for the development of future cultural policies
- to link İzmir to the international network of Mediterranean cities and initiate cooperation through joint cultural and artistic projects and programs

The workshop successfully achieved a consensus among participants and developed a collective cultural vision for İzmir's future.

³ For an overview of the discussions and outcomes of İzmir's first participatory cultural planning process, see: İzmir Metropolitan Municipality, *İzmir Kültür Çalıştayı Kitabı (İzmir Culture Workshop)*, 2010.

Among many others, the most striking recommendation emphasized by most participants was that the local government should assume a facilitative role focusing on capacity building, support, and paving the way for independent cultural actors and civic initiatives rather than planning, generating content, and implementing cultural activities on their behalf. For this to occur, first, the establishment of a “Metropolitan Academy for Culture” dedicated to promoting research, capacity building, preservation, documentation, and cooperation is essential; and second, the creation of an independent collaborative platform for civil society operators, both supported by the ongoing efforts of the İMM, are two immediate suggestions made to ensure the sustainability of the proposed vision and strategy.

In the last fifteen years since the Culture Workshop, İzmir has experienced numerous developments in the field of culture and arts, with each initiative leading to the next. Notable examples include the İzmir Bay Area Design Project (*İzmirDeniz*) (2012), the establishment of the İzmir Mediterranean Academy in 2013, and the İzmir Cultural Pla+form Initiative (İKPG) in 2014, which will be further detailed in the following chapters. Thanks to this progress, we can now discuss the existence of an authentic “İzmir Model of Cultural Governance”.

Encouraged by the new mindset that flourished after the Workshop, several independent cultural initiatives have emerged as active stakeholders in local cultural practices alongside İMM. Advocating for a bottom-up approach, they have generated various cultural projects, some of which were also supported by İMM. This collaboration eventually led İzmir to participate in international cultural programs such as UCLG’s Pilot Cities Europe and Leading City programs, completed in 2019 and 2023, respectively. Through these programs, İzmir has engaged in a continuous learning process, capacity building, and fostering connectivity, all guided by the principles and values of UCLG's Culture 21 Actions.

Looking at some of the socio-economic developments during this period, İzmir’s population has increased by %15.3 over the past 15 years (2009-2024), approaching 4.5 million as of 2024, which counts as the third most populated city in Türkiye, after İstanbul and Ankara.

A selected internal migration flow of an educated⁴, high-income urban population from other major cities, particularly from İstanbul and Ankara⁵ to İzmir, has been observed in the last decade. This trend is not solely based on economic opportunities but is driven more by the desire to pursue an “alternative lifestyle”. Findings from research conducted by Kaba and Südaş in 2022 among immigrants relocating from İstanbul to İzmir indicate that İzmir is perceived as a place offering predominantly an “alternative lifestyle” (in terms of recreational facilities and socio-political and cultural values) and a “high quality of life”: *“It is a place that gives the sense of a never-ending vacation with its attractions such as the sea, mild climate, and summer houses; a more relaxed and modern lifestyle with its original cuisine, liberal urban atmosphere, warm social relationships, and a more livable place characterized by tranquility, comfort, and accessibility.”*⁶

Since 2023, the Academy has hosted a recurring conversation series “İzmir’e yeni geldim, ve...” (*I am new to İzmir, and...*) designed to amplify the voices of individuals who have recently moved to the city. These gatherings create a platform for newcomers to articulate their impressions, aspirations, and concerns, while offering a space for mutual listening and reflection. Rather than merely documenting individual experiences, the series fosters cultural participation by inviting diverse actors to contribute to the shared understanding of İzmir’s evolving urban and social fabric. In doing so, it also serves as a subtle yet meaningful

⁴ According to *Economic Indicators of İzmir-2023 (Ekonomik Göstergelerle İzmir-2023)* report by İZTO in May 2024, looking at the educational background of the migrating population to İzmir in 2023, 576 individuals hold a doctorate (%0.67), 5.183 have a master's degree (%6.02), 36.036 are undergraduates (%41.89), and 44.230 have completed high school or equivalent vocational training (%51.42). The ratios were also similar in the previous years, which indicates that İzmir is attracting a qualified immigrant population overall. İzmir Chamber of Commerce (İZTO), *Economic Indicators of İzmir-2023 (Ekonomik Göstergelerle İzmir-2023)* (İzmir: İZTO, 2024), <https://api.izto.org.tr/storage/EditorUpload/original/24rnWNq7EN7ndRjh.pdf>.

⁵ According to TURKSTAT data, in 2022, İzmir received 132.426 people in internal migration particularly from İstanbul and Ankara, with a net figure of 25.114. Within the total internal migration to İzmir, migrants from İstanbul have been around 12% each year, reaching 16% in 2020 and the migrants from Ankara averages around 6.5–7% per year. Together, these two cities account for approximately 20% of the total internal migration to İzmir. İzmir Development Agency (İZKA), “Migration to İzmir,” İZKA Veri Bankası, <https://veribankasi.izka.org.tr/graphDetails/61c3995f7d677ae7df82726d>.

⁶ B. Kaba and İ. Südaş, “İzmir’deki İstanbullu Yaşam Tarzı Göçmenlerinin ‘İzmir İmajı’,” *Sosyoloji Dergisi* 44 (2022): 249–273, <https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/2694229>.

mechanism for incorporating the perspectives of new residents into the city's cultural discourse.

Another paper by Shah, Gökçen, and Polat, published in the *Kent Akademisi Dergisi (Journal of Urban Academy)* in 2024, analyzes the internal migration trends of the “creative class”⁷ from İstanbul to İzmir through the lens of “quality of life”. It suggests that although İstanbul holds a larger share of the creative sectors compared to İzmir, the recent trend of increasing creative migration from İstanbul to İzmir is primarily driven by living conditions and the quality of life for the creative class. İzmir stands out in terms of quality of life, surpassing İstanbul in social, environmental, physical, and economic parameters.⁸

Therefore, lacking support from local public and private institutions and having been neglected by the national cultural industries in the past, İzmir, once regarded as a city that had lost its intellectual capital and creative people who longed to become a part of a more vibrant cultural and creative scene in İstanbul, turned into a “dreamland” starting in the mid-2010s for creative individuals from other megacities⁹. People sought a better place to settle, looking for a peaceful, liberal, and permissive creative environment, largely due to the effects of the AKP's restrictive and repressive policies on social and cultural life, which were worsened by economic challenges such as hyperinflation, declining purchasing power, rising housing prices and rents, and the difficulties posed by the COVID-19 pandemic in the early 2020s.

These socio-economic developments have led to significant changes in return, affecting both daily urban life and the cultural scene of İzmir, including the gentrification of potential spaces for art production, performances, exhibitions, workshops, and gatherings for the locals.

⁷ Richard Florida's “creative class” theory introduced in his book “The Rise of the Creative Class” (2002) suggests that cities and regions must offer more than just economic opportunities to attract creative individuals. Diversity, tolerance and openness as well as social and cultural factors (soft factors) attract creative people and the presence and activity of this group plays a crucial role in the economic development and enhancing the competitiveness of the cities.

⁸ Shah, K. A., Gökçen, Ş., & Polat, B. (2024). Yaratıcı Sınıfın Göç Eğilimlerinde Yaşam Kalitesinin Yeri: İstanbul'dan İzmir'e Yaratıcı Göç. *Kent Akademisi*, 17(1), 22-42. <https://doi.org/10.35674/kent.1388912>

⁹ Sarp Keskiner, statement to the author regarding his participation in the Bosch Alumni Network Culture Clusters event, 2024.

Although the city has seen an increasing number of independent and non-profit art spaces and initiatives emerging over the past decade, a constant whirlwind can also be observed, with some disappearing shortly after while others resurface at different times.

As will be elaborated in Chapter Three, a debate has recently emerged among independent artists and cultural operators in İzmir concerning how to sustain their practices and the future prospects and continuity of independent cultural initiatives in the city.

This study, consisting of three chapters, will focus on the linear evolution of capacity-building and networking processes within civil society (*in this thesis, civil society is defined with a limited focus on independent artists and initiatives in culture and the arts, and the term may be used interchangeably*) as an emerging independent actor in cultural governance in İzmir, paralleled by the participatory cultural policies supported by the İMM since 2009. It aims to examine the challenges to survival, the reasons behind instances when communication and collaboration among cultural actors – both between the local government and civil actors reciprocally and among the independent civil actors themselves – are disrupted, and potential ways to address these issues. It seeks to provide a fresh assessment and further develop a series of recommendations from an external perspective.

The first chapter outlines the key concepts related to cultural and creative industries (CCIs), cultural governance, and the role of civil society within this context, as well as their preferred definitions within the framework of this study. It also references selected international standard-setting documents, conventions, and programs such as UNESCO's Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions (2005), the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and the UCLG Agenda 21 for Culture, which define and emphasize the role of culture and civil society in sustainable development.

The second chapter offers a brief background on the history and culture of İzmir, highlighting its significance as a crucial port city in the Mediterranean for centuries. It then focuses on developments in the arts and culture over the past fifteen years, driven by the İzmir Culture Workshop held in 2009, organized by İMM. The chapter reviews and analyzes the key

milestones laid out on a linear timeline that contributed to the establishment of a peculiar model of cultural governance for İzmir. These milestones played a vital role in the emergence and strengthening of civil society as an independent actor in the arts and culture sector. Notable examples include the foundation of the Academy and the İKPG, the İzmirDeniz project, and the completion of Agenda 21 for Culture Pilot City and Leading City programs.

This trajectory gained further momentum in the second half of the 2010s, marked by a visible increase in the number and diversity of independent cultural initiatives across İzmir. Many of these emerged with the support of European Union-funded projects and networks, reflecting a growing capacity among civic actors to engage with transnational funding mechanisms. This expanding ecosystem, in turn, reinforced the call for more localized and sustained support structures, eventually leading to the establishment of the İzmir Culture Fund (İzKF) by the municipality—marking a significant step toward institutional recognition and support for independent cultural actors in the city.

The third chapter will examine the current situation of independent cultural actors, artists, initiatives, and collectives in İzmir in the post-pandemic era. It will explore the impact of COVID-19 on their survival and the daily challenges they encounter at various levels, including artistic production, business management, access to resources and funding, and more. In the final section of this chapter, titled “From Here, Where To?”, the focus will shift to ongoing debates and efforts related to survival and sustainability. It will delve into the collective thinking process aimed at generating solutions and cooperative models that can ensure the continuity of the civil movements in culture and the arts. Additionally, this chapter will provide an overview of the local government's current position, highlighting its efforts and policies in capacity building, empowerment and support for artists and civil initiatives compared to fifteen years ago when it first embraced this vision of revitalization. The chapter will conclude with a summary of key findings and recommendations.

The thesis is guided by a set of key research questions that aim to uncover the role and evolving significance of independent cultural initiatives and civic actors in İzmir's cultural governance landscape over the past fifteen years. How have these actors positioned

themselves within or outside of institutional structures? In what ways have they contributed to the participatory governance of culture, and how have they influenced local cultural policy-making processes? What forms of informal collaboration, solidarity, and knowledge exchange have emerged among them, particularly in response to precarious conditions and structural limitations? How has the İzmir Metropolitan Municipality engaged with these actors, and what kinds of institutional mechanisms or support models have been developed—or left lacking? Ultimately, the study seeks to understand whether a sustainable and inclusive model of cultural governance can be imagined through the dynamic interplay between civil society and local authorities in İzmir, and what lessons this evolving experience may offer for broader discussions on democratizing cultural policy at the local level.

This thesis holds special meaning for me, as I have been fortunate to participate in and contribute to many of the projects referenced throughout the study—from the İzmir Culture Workshop in 2009 to the creation and launch of the İzKF in 2023. This funding tool, developed by the İzmir Metropolitan Municipality, is the first of its kind among local governments in Türkiye and operates through open calls to support independent cultural producers in the city. Over the years, I have been involved in various capacities—researcher, facilitator, team member, cultural manager, and consultant—across a range of projects that have shaped İzmir’s evolving cultural landscape. Although I completed my coursework in the MA Program in Cultural Management at İstanbul Bilgi University more than fifteen years ago, it was this very program that initially led me to begin working on cultural projects in İzmir. Only recently have I had the opportunity to revisit the thesis and complete what I left unfinished. With this work, I now hope to officially conclude my academic journey in the program.

The study is grounded in a dual methodological approach that combines experiential field knowledge with thorough document analysis. The study draws from my active involvement in cultural governance projects and initiatives carried out in İzmir over the past fifteen years. These experiences have provided me with valuable insights into the dynamics, actors,

challenges, and evolving strategies of cultural policy-making and implementation at the local level.

In parallel, the research involves a systematic review and synthesis of a wide range of international standard-setting documents, alongside recent studies, policy reports, official documents, strategic plans, and project evaluations produced and updated over time by independent cultural initiatives, cultural professionals, and academics, as well as the Municipality and local organizations within the cultural field in İzmir. These sources were critically examined to identify recurring themes, innovative practices, and structural challenges concerning participatory cultural governance and the reciprocal roles of civil society and local government as the two primary actors in cultural governance in the city.

By integrating firsthand experience with the analysis of empirical material, this study adopts a reflexive and practice-based perspective. It aims to contribute both theoretically and practically to the understanding of cultural governance in cities, with İzmir serving as a case. This approach allows for the articulation of context-specific findings while situating them within broader theoretical frameworks of cultural policy, governance, and civic engagement.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND GLOBAL BACKGROUND

According to UNESCO, “Culture” in the broadest sense, is “the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group, that encompasses, not only art and literature, but lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions, and beliefs.”¹⁰

The data shows that “the cultural and creative industries are among the fastest-growing sectors in the world. According to UNESCO and UNCTAD’s latest post-2020 reports, the global cultural and creative industries (CCIs) generate approximately USD 2.3 trillion annually, accounting for around 3.1% of global GDP.¹¹ These sectors also employ nearly 50 million people worldwide, representing 6.2% of total employment. However, the COVID-19 pandemic had a severe impact on CCIs: UNESCO estimates that in 2020 alone, over 10 million jobs were lost, and the sector experienced a decline of around USD 750 billion in gross value added.¹² The crisis exposed the vulnerabilities of cultural work, particularly the precarious status of freelance and informal labor, which lacks access to social protection. UNESCO emphasizes that despite these challenges, CCIs remain a strategic investment for sustainable development, innovation, and social cohesion. Thus, governments around the world have shown a growing interest in implementing policies that support these industries to boost cultural development, innovation, and economic growth.

¹⁰UNESCO, *Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity* (Paris: UNESCO, 2001), art. 1, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000127162>.

¹¹ United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), *Creative Economy Outlook 2024* (Geneva: UNCTAD, 2024), https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/ditctsce2024d2_ch01_en.pdf.

¹² UNESCO, *Re|Shaping Policies for Creativity: Addressing Culture as a Global Public Good* (Paris: UNESCO Publishing, 2023), <https://www.unesco.org/creativity/sites/default/files/medias/fichiers/2023/01/380474eng.pdf>.

It is, therefore, essential to have a basic understanding of the evolving concepts and terminology around the terms such as “cultural industries”, “creative industries”, “creative economy”, “cultural governance” and “participation”. A brief overview is provided below:

1.1.Evolving Terminology and Concepts: What is Cultural and Creative Industries?

The cultural and creative industries (CCIs) have been defined over time and there are many definitions used today by different countries and institutions.

The use of the term “creative industries” became popular around twenty years ago to describe a wide range of activities, some of which have long-lived origins and others that came about more recently with the rise of digital technology. “Many of these activities had strong cultural roots and the term ‘cultural industries’ was already in use to describe theatre, dance, music, film, the visual arts and the heritage sector, although this term was itself controversial as many artists felt it demeaning to think of what they did as being, in any way, an ‘industry’”¹³. According to Newbigin, ‘industries’ or not, the fact that these activities – both the narrowly defined cultural industries and the much wider range of new creative industries – have been of growing importance to the economy of many countries and have given employment to a large number of people is undeniable.

Two decades later, the significant contribution of the CCIs in economic value creation is acknowledged by nearly all governments worldwide and led to the emergence of a broader concept known as the “creative economy”¹⁴. Hence, under the conditions of increased urban competitiveness in today’s global era, it has become necessary for cities to evaluate their position, both within national boundaries and globally, from the perspective of the creative

¹³ John Newbigin, “What Is the Creative Economy?”, *British Council*, n.d., <https://creativeeconomy.britishcouncil.org/guide/what-creative-economy/>.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

economy.¹⁵ But the scope of the creative economy is determined by the extent of the creative industries. So, the definition of the creative industries has become of crucial importance.

The most used definitions of creative industries are provided by The UK Government's Department for Culture, Media, and Sport (DCMS)¹⁶, the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), and the United Nations agencies UNCTAD, UNESCO and UNDP.

1.1.1. The Definition of DCMS

The first and widely adopted definition of the term “creative industries” was made by DCMS in the Creative Industries Mapping Documents (1998) which defines the creative industries as “those industries which have their origin in individual creativity, skill and talent and which have a potential for wealth and job creation through the generation and exploitation of intellectual property” and breaks it down into thirteen sub-sectors: advertising; architecture; the art and antiques market; crafts; design; designer fashion; film and video; interactive leisure software; music; the performing arts; publishing; software and computer games; and television and radio.” However, there has been also considerable contestation about this definition, criticized mainly for being too broad and lacking a transparent method of classification in taking into consideration which industries and occupations should be considered as “creative” and which should not.¹⁷ Thus, hindering it from setting an international standard.

Several different definitions and models have been developed since, to be able to provide a systematic and common understanding of the structural characteristics of the cultural and

¹⁵ Ş. G. Dünder, “Kültür Ekonomisi Açısından İzmir’in Akdeniz’deki Yeri,” *Meltem: İzmir Akdeniz Akademisi Kitabı*, (December 2016): 73–87.

¹⁶ While the initial name of the institution was the Department of Culture, Media and Sports, the word “digital” was added to become the Department of Digital, Culture, Media and Sports to incorporate the development of digital technologies in creative industries.

¹⁷ Hasan Bakshi, Alan Freeman, and Peter Higgs, *A Dynamic Mapping of the UK’s Creative Industries* (London: NESTA, 2013), https://media.nesta.org.uk/documents/a_dynamic_mapping_of_the_creative_industries.pdf.

creative industries. A reason for the multiple approaches to arise, as underlined in UNESCO's Creative Economy Report 2013¹⁸, is that "communities often seek to reshape prevailing models to better match the realities of their local context, culture, and markets. The terms are therefore constantly evolving as new dialogues develop."¹⁹ However, not to forget, the consistency of the definition and models is important in allowing comparisons over time.

The Creative Industries Council²⁰ Skillset Skills Group in collaboration with Creative & Cultural Skills*, DCMS and NESTA²¹, reviewed the shortcomings of this classification method later in 2013 and proposed a new methodology based on the identification of creative occupation and calculations of "creative intensities"²².²³ The following year, the DCMS redefined the creative industries through a dynamic mapping and updated their definition as shown in Figure 1. below, by collecting them under 9 main groups vs. 13 groups that were categorized in 1998.

¹⁸ UNDP and UNESCO, *Creative Economy Report 2013 Special Edition: Widening Local Development Pathways*, 2013, https://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/2013-creative-economy-report-widening-local-development-pathways-en_1.pdf.

¹⁹ *An overview of these models is presented in Ibid.*, 21.

²⁰ The Creative Industries Council (CIC) is a forum of government, creative businesses, and other creative organizations focusing on areas where there are barriers to the growth of UK creative sectors such as access to finance, skills, export markets, regulation, intellectual property and infrastructure, and on promoting opportunities such as the CreaTech category and greater diversity and inclusion.

The Creative Industries Council (CIC), "About the Creative Industries Council," *TheCreativeIndustries.co.uk*, <https://www.thecreativeindustries.co.uk>.

* Creative and Cultural Skills was the licensed Sector Skills Council for the UK's creative and cultural industries, including craft, cultural heritage, design, literature, music, performing arts and visual arts. Closed recently in 2023, being unable to secure funding to continue its work.

²¹ Formerly NESTA (National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts), is an independent charity that works to increase the innovation capacity of the UK. See: NESTA, <https://www.nesta.org.uk>.

²² The idea of "creative intensity" (the proportion of people doing creative jobs within each industry) suggests which industries should be included. If the proportion of people doing creative jobs in a particular industry is substantial, above a 30% threshold, the industries are candidates for inclusion within the Creative Industries classification.

²³ For a wider discussion, see: ScreenSkills, *Classifying and Measuring the Creative Industries* (February 2013), https://www.screenskills.com/media/1549/classifying_and_measuring_the_creative_industries.pdf.

Table 1.1. DCMS Creative Industries Classification

1998 Classification (13 sub-sectors)	2014 Classification (9 groups)
• Advertising • Architecture • Art and Antiques • Crafts • Design • Designer Fashion • Film and Video • Interactive Leisure Software • Music • Performing Arts • Publishing • Software and Computer Games • Television and Radio	• Advertising and Marketing • Architecture • Crafts • Design (Product, Graphic, Fashion) • Film, TV, Video, Radio and Photography • IT, Software and Computer Services • Publishing • Museums, Galleries and Libraries • Music, Performing and Visual Arts

(Source: İZKA, *Analysis of the Creative Industries in Türkiye at Nuts-2 Regions Level: Focus on İzmir, 2004-2019.*)

1.1.2. The Definition of United Nations (UNCTAD/ UNESCO/ UNDP) and WIPO

The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) defines the creative industries as the “creation, production and distribution stages of products and services that use creativity and intellectual capital as the primary input” (2008) and categorizes them under

four main groups: heritage, arts, media and functional creations, these groups are in turn divided into nine subgroups, as presented in the figure below²⁴:

Figure 1.1. UNCTAD/UNESCO Classification of Creative Industries



(Source: İZKA, *Analysis of the Creative Industries in Türkiye at Nuts-2 Regions Level: Focus on İzmir, 2004-2019.*)

²⁴ *The Creative Economy Report 2008* is the result of cooperation within the United Nations system, comprising contributions from UNCTAD, UNDP, UNESCO, WIPO, and ITC, and co-signed by Kemal Derviş, then head of the United Nations Development Programme. United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), *Creative Economy Report 2008* (New York: UNCTAD, 2008), https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/ditc20082cer_en.pdf.

Although the terms “creative industries” and “cultural industries” could often be seen to be used interchangeably, WIPO suggests that “creative industries” include “cultural industries”, as well as all cultural and artistic productions used in live performances, cultural heritage and other art-intensive activities (2008). The focus is thus placed on “intellectual property” as the embodiment of the creativity that is used in the making of goods and services. A distinction is made between industries that actually produce intellectual property and those that are necessary to convey the goods and services to the consumer.²⁵ UNESCO, on the other hand, places an emphasis on innovation, describing them as “goods and services produced by the cultural industries and those that depend on innovation, including many types of research and software development” (2013)²⁶.

In addition to their growing importance to the economies of many countries through the creation of wealth and employment for a large number of people, it is impossible to separate their economic value from their social and cultural value. The first global Creative Economy Report, published in 2008 by UNCTAD, also underlines the social benefits of the creative industries: *“The interface between creativity, culture, economics, and technology, as expressed in the ability to create and circulate intellectual capital, has the potential to generate income, jobs, and exports while at the same time promoting social inclusion, cultural diversity, and human development.”*²⁷

In the report, UNCTAD emphasizes the role of civil society within the multifaceted structure of the creative industries. It highlights the importance of forging strategic alliances to facilitate interactions among stakeholders, promoting dialogue, synergy, and the exchange of

²⁵ United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), *Creative Economy Report 2008* (New York: UNCTAD, 2008), 12, https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/ditc20082cer_en.pdf.

²⁶ United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), *The Creative Ecosystem: Facilitating the Development of Creative Industries*, Working Paper 08/2014, <https://www.unido.org/sites/default/files/files/2022-01/the%20creative%20ecosystem%20-%20facilitating%20the%20development%20of%20creative%20industries.pdf>.

²⁷ United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), *Creative Economy Report 2008* (New York: UNCTAD, 2008), https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/ditc20082cer_en.pdf.

experiences. Furthermore, it urges that artists and creators, regardless of whether they work independently or not, should build alliances with the following stakeholders:

- agents from the government, both public and semi-public sectors
- private-sector and profit-led enterprises and business groups, potential sponsors
- lobbying groups, federations, professional associations and unions
- non-profit organizations such as foundations, NGOs and academia

As mentioned above, there is no “one-size-fits-all” definition of cultural and creative industries however they are all shaped around some common concepts such as cultural and artistic production, creativity, intellectual capital and labor, and make an emphasis on developing technology, innovation and digital transformation.

1.2. Cultural Governance and The Role of Local Governments in Shaping Cultural Policies

The definition of “governance” has started to change in the 21st century, along with the evolving definition of democracy. From the one that attributes power solely to the will of the majority, it has been promoted to promote “participation,” where all citizens are provided the opportunity to be involved in decision-making processes on matters and policies that affect their lives.

In recent decades, as frequently emphasized by cultural policy experts and creative city thinkers such as Richard Florida, Charles Landry, and Franco Bianchini, cities worldwide have increasingly taken on pivotal roles in cultural governance, reflecting a shift toward localized management and promotion of cultural policies. This change has granted cities greater autonomy over their cultural policies, allowing local governments to tailor cultural initiatives to the unique identities and needs of their communities, thus fostering more relevant and impactful cultural programming.

As cities become more culturally diverse due to globalization and migration, local governments face the challenge of managing and embracing this diversity. Cities have developed policies to promote cultural inclusivity, ensuring that diverse cultural expressions are recognized and valued within their urban fabric. In today's cities, where diverse cultures intersect, local governments become key players in promoting dialogue among citizens, communities, civil society organizations, and international networks.

To tackle the challenges presented by these global shifts and the new dynamics in cultural governance, cities are also increasingly engaging in “city diplomacy” collaborating directly with international counterparts to address global issues collectively and exchange best practices. This phenomenon highlights the growing influence of cities as global actors, capable of shaping cultural policies beyond their national contexts.

This transition from traditional cultural policies to more dynamic models reflects cities' efforts to create sustainable cultural ecosystems. This approach emphasizes local collaboration among various stakeholders, including artists, communities, and private entities, to co-create more adaptive and resilient cultural policies, highlighting the crucial role of civil actors in the cultural field.

In this regard, the “İzmir Model: A Proposal for a Democratic Municipal Governance Model for İzmir,”²⁸ commonly referred to as the “İzmir Model,” was compiled and written by Prof. Dr. İlhan Tekeli. This significant work emerged from a collective study organized by the İMM and offers a series of concrete proposals aimed at strengthening civil society participation in urban governance, drawing on the experiences of the İzmir Metropolitan Municipality from 2004 to 2018.

Tekeli, emphasizes the importance of establishing regular communication opportunities, such as workshops and meetings between the municipality and civil society organizations to ensure their effective participation in decision-making processes. He also advocates for the

²⁸ For more on that see, Tekeli, İlhan. *İzmir Modeli: İzmir İçin Demokratik Bir Belediyecilik Modeli Önerisi*. Yayına hazırlayanlar Ayşegül Sabuktay ve Ertekin Akpınar. İzmir: İzmir Akdeniz Akademisi, 2018. https://www.izmeda.org/yayimlar/dosyalar/izmir_modeli_kitap_WEB.pdf.

active involvement of civil society in strategic planning processes. Such participation helps identify social needs and priorities more accurately, leading to the establishment of shared goals between citizens and local authorities. Furthermore, Tekeli highlights the need to build the capacity of civil society organizations. Through cultural training programs and resource support, these organizations can enhance their impact and sustainability in the public sphere. Finally, he proposes the establishment of a continuous communication and collaboration mechanism between the municipality and civil society. This would facilitate the development and implementation of joint projects, ultimately contributing to stronger and more democratic urban governance.

1.3. The 2001 Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity

The 2001 Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, adopted by UNESCO in the aftermath of significant global shifts—including 9/11 and growing concerns over cultural homogenization—asserts that cultural diversity is “as necessary for humankind as biodiversity is for nature.”²⁹ It recognizes cultural diversity not merely as a heritage to be protected but as a driving force for development, creativity, and democratic governance. The Declaration frames cultural rights as an integral component of human rights, placing particular emphasis on the right of all individuals and communities to participate freely in cultural life and to access their cultural expressions.³⁰ It also articulates a clear link between cultural diversity and sustainable development, highlighting the importance of intercultural dialogue, linguistic plurality, and cultural policy-making at the local level. In the context of this thesis, these principles provide a normative framework for evaluating how independent

²⁹ UNESCO, *Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity* (Paris: UNESCO, 2001), Article 1, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000127162>.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, Article 5.

cultural initiatives in İzmir negotiate access, participation, and representation in a rapidly transforming urban and institutional environment.

1.4. Convention on the Protection of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions and Civil Society

The non-monetized benefits of culture can lead to transformative change when individuals and communities are empowered to take ownership of their own development processes, including the use of local resources, skills and knowledge and diverse cultural and creative expressions.³¹ In this context, UNESCO’s Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions (2005) is “an international standard-setting instrument that outlines the responsibilities of civil society in cultural governance and recognizes their significant role in policy-making and implementation.”³² UNESCO describes the adoption of the Convention as a milestone in international cultural policy. “Through this historic agreement, the global community formally recognized the dual nature, both cultural and economic, of contemporary cultural expressions produced by artists and cultural professionals.”³³

“The Convention understands civil society as constituted by ‘non-governmental organizations, non-profit organizations, professionals in the culture sector and associated sectors, groups that support the work of artists and cultural communities’, partially leaving the private sector outside its immediate purview, it focuses on an extremely heterogeneous universe of stakeholders that have experience configuring a broad range of alliances or partnerships with the public sector and civic actors at the subnational, national and global

³¹ UNDP and UNESCO, *Creative Economy Report 2013 Special Edition: Widening Local Development Pathways* (New York: UNDP/UNESCO, 2013), https://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/2013-creative-economy-report-widening-local-development-pathways-en_1.pdf.

³² UNESCO, *Re-Shaping Policies for Creativity: Addressing Culture as a Global Public Good*, chap. 4, “Opening Up Cultural Governance Through Civil Society Participation” (Paris: UNESCO, 2022), <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000380474>.

³³ UNESCO Türkiye Millî Komisyonu, “Kültürel İfadelerin Çeşitliliği İhtisas Komitesi,” <https://unesco.org.tr/Pages/651/294/Diversity-of-Cultural-Expressions-Expertise-Committee>.

levels.”³⁴ It also emphasizes that civil society organizations play a crucial role in advocating for the needs of artists and cultural professionals and providing them with the necessary means to create, produce, share, and access a variety of cultural expressions. As agents of change, civil society organizations can influence debates and processes by actively participating in the design and implementation of cultural policies at both local and global levels.³⁵ As both a guiding force and a watchdog, civil society actors significantly shape and monitor development policies to ensure effective implementation.

1.5. UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

Adopted by the General Assembly of the UN in September 2015, “Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”³⁶ is the global agenda on sustainable development until 2030, building on 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 specific targets.³⁷

Although it includes several explicit references to cultural aspects, none of the 17 SDGs focuses exclusively on culture, which has been widely criticized by several global networks³⁸ as well as regional and global civil society organizations prior to its adoption in 2015.

³⁴ UNESCO, *Re-Shaping Policies for Creativity: Addressing Culture as a Global Public Good*, chap. 4, “Opening Up Cultural Governance Through Civil Society Participation” (Paris: UNESCO, 2022), <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000380474>.

³⁵ UNESCO, “Civil Society Organizations,” *Diversity of Cultural Expressions*, <https://www.unesco.org/creativity/en/partners-and-networks/civil-society-organizations>.

³⁶ United Nations General Assembly, *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, A/RES/70/1 (New York: United Nations, 2015), <https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>.

³⁷ United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), *Culture in the Sustainable Development Goals: A Guide for Local Action* (2018), https://www.agenda21culture.net/sites/default/files/culturesdgs_web_en.pdf.

³⁸ Namely: The Committee on Culture of UCLG, International Federation of Arts Councils and Culture Agencies (IFACCA), the International Federation of Coalitions for Cultural Diversity (IFCCD), Culture Action Europe, the International Music Council, Arterial Network, the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) and the Red Latinoamericana de Arte Para la Transformación Social.

Agenda 21 for Culture, *The Future We Want Includes Culture* (2015), “Culture in the SDG Outcome Document: Progress Made, but Important Steps Remain Ahead,” https://www.agenda21culture.net/sites/default/files/culturesdgs_web_en.pdf.

United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) and their allies³⁹ encourages the localization of the SDGs so that specific local challenges and opportunities can be taken into account in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Therefore, the local and regional governments play a crucial role in the achievement of the SDGs. However, the “localization” of the SDGs from a cultural perspective also poses challenges mainly because of the fact that the content related to culture in the Agenda 2030 is weak. Hence, cities and local governments need to encourage the involvement and empowerment of the citizens, actors, and networks related to culture in any local process related to “localization”.

As the current SDGs approach their 2030 target, a growing coalition of cultural networks—led by the UCLG Committee on Culture—has launched an international advocacy effort calling for the explicit inclusion of culture in the next global development agenda. The campaign argues that culture remains structurally overlooked in the SDG framework despite its proven relevance to education, social inclusion, climate action, and economic resilience. Its core demand is the adoption of a standalone Culture Goal in any future global goals framework, a step seen as crucial for mainstreaming cultural rights, safeguarding cultural diversity, and supporting local cultural ecosystems.⁴⁰

As mentioned previously, the creative economy promotes social inclusion, cultural diversity, and human development. These factors place creative industries as crucial sectors for achieving the 2030 Agenda, and the contribution of culture to many of the SDGs, both economic and social, is beyond dispute. Culture directly affects the quality of life, human development, environmental sustainability, and overall prosperity.

³⁹ Culture2030Goal Campaign, “Culture2030Goal Statement: No Future Without Culture,” June 2024, 2. The campaign is coordinated by the UCLG Committee on Culture together with six global networks: Arterial Network, Culture Action Europe (CAE), International Federation of Arts Councils and Culture Agencies (IFACCA), International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), and International Music Council (IMC). https://culture2030goal.net/sites/default/files/2024-06/EN_culture2030goal_Jun2024_Statement.pdf.

⁴⁰ United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), *Culture2030Goal Campaign Overview*, UCLG Committee on Culture, 2023, <https://www.agenda21culture.net/advocacy/culture-2030-goal>.

1.6. UCLG and Agenda 21 for Culture

For more than a decade, UCLG has been actively advocating for the integration of culture in all approaches to sustainable development.

Agenda 21 for Culture, also referred to as Culture 21, is a pioneering document that serves as a global guide for cities and local governments in developing and implementing cultural policies. Approved in May 2004 at the IV Porto Alegre Forum of Local Authorities for Social Inclusion in Barcelona, it highlights the crucial role of culture in sustainable development, advocating for its recognition alongside environmental, social, and economic dimensions. Agenda 21 for Culture calls for recognizing culture as the fourth pillar of sustainable development, next to environmental, social, and economic factors, and urges cities and local and regional governments worldwide to establish robust cultural policies and incorporate a cultural dimension into all public policies.

Since its launch, it has become a crucial reference for local governments, civil society activists, and experts dedicated to integrating culture into local sustainable development. It was further enhanced in 2015 with the launch of “Culture 21: Actions” at the first UCLG Culture Summit held in Bilbao, which is a practical toolkit outlining 100 actions that enable cities to incorporate culture into their sustainable development strategies. “These actions serve as a tool for self-assessment, policy innovation, and peer learning for cities, accessible to local governments, civil society organizations, citizens, experts, and other interested stakeholders.”⁴¹

The document promotes inclusive governance models that involve civil society, cultural organizations, and citizens in decision-making processes. This approach fosters community engagement and ensures that cultural policies reflect diverse perspectives.

⁴¹ United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG). *Culture in the Sustainable Development Goals: A Guide for Local Action*. 2018. https://www.agenda21culture.net/sites/default/files/culturesdgs_web_en.pdf.

The Agenda underscores the importance of cultural rights as integral to human rights, promoting policies that ensure individuals and communities can freely and equally access cultural resources and participate in cultural life. This emphasis supports social inclusion and the celebration of diverse cultural identities within urban settings.

Recognizing the economic potential of cultural industries, Agenda 21 for Culture also urges cities to support local cultural production, contributing to economic growth and job creation while enriching the cultural fabric of urban areas.

The “Pilot Cities” and “Leading Cities” programs are integral initiatives of Agenda 21 for Culture, coordinated by the UCLG Committee on Culture. These programs aim to integrate cultural considerations into sustainable urban development by fostering learning, collaboration, and leadership among cities worldwide.

The Pilot Cities program, titled “Culture in Sustainable Cities: Learning with Culture 21 Actions”, provides cities with a structured framework to assess, design, and implement cultural policies that support sustainable development, emphasizing a learning process based on the principles outlined in Culture 21 Actions. Key features include:

- Assessment: cities evaluate their existing cultural policies and practices by comparing them to the Culture 21 Actions framework to identify strengths and areas for improvement.
- Capacity building: participating cities engage in workshops, seminars, and peer-learning activities to enhance their capabilities in cultural policy development.
- Action plans: cities develop and implement tailored action plans to incorporate cultural factors into their broader sustainable development strategies.
- Networking: the program cultivates connections between different participating cities, enabling the exchange of experiences and best practices in cultural governance.

One of the most valuable contributions of the Pilot Cities program lies in its emphasis on self-assessment as a tool for institutional reflection. By encouraging local governments and actors to systematically evaluate their cultural strategies, the program helps reveal latent

capacities as well as structural deficiencies. This process fosters a form of organizational self-awareness that can be foundational for long-term policy innovation. However, the extent to which this self-assessment translates into inclusive and actionable outcomes varies significantly across cities. In particular, engagement with civil society and marginalized groups often remains inconsistent, constrained by local political will, administrative capacity, or a lack of structured mechanisms for participation. In some contexts, municipal institutions may rely on existing networks dominated by established actors, unintentionally excluding informal or underrepresented voices. Thus, while the Program offers a valuable framework for cultural policy introspection, its impact is shaped by the socio-political conditions and participatory infrastructures of each city.

The Leading Cities program on the other hand, recognizes cities with substantial experience in implementing the Agenda 21 for Culture. These cities serve as exemplars and advocates, promoting the integration of cultural policies into sustainable urban development both locally and internationally. Key features include:

- Mentorship: Leading Cities mentor Pilot Cities by sharing insights and best practices to guide them in developing effective cultural policies.
- Advocacy: these cities act as representatives for the UCLG Committee on Culture, advocating for the network at international events and engaging in global discussions on culture and sustainability.
- Knowledge sharing: leading cities organize seminars, workshops, and public events to share their experiences and interact with other municipalities on cultural policy development.

The Leading Cities program's most distinctive contribution lies in its ability to consolidate local cultural practices into internationally visible models. By spotlighting cities that have demonstrated long-term commitment to integrating culture into urban governance, the Program not only recognizes best practices but also enables their strategic dissemination and intercultural dialogue. However, the Program's emphasis on replicable models and leadership narratives may inadvertently privilege cities with already mature cultural

infrastructures, political stability, and international visibility. This risks marginalizing innovative but less institutionalized practices from smaller or structurally disadvantaged cities.

Despite these limitations, these programs have empowered cities to develop more effective and inclusive cultural policies by providing structured frameworks and encouraging peer learning, they have created a global network of cities dedicated to cultural development, facilitating the exchange of ideas and collaborative initiatives across diverse contexts.

İMM joined the Pilot Cities Europe Program in 2015 and completed the process in 2019. Building upon the successes and insights gained as a Pilot City, İzmir was invited to become a Leading City in 2020. Details of İzmir's experience as a Pilot and Leading City will be addressed in the next chapter.

Since the adoption of Culture 21 Actions in 2015, significant global shifts – including technological advancements, socio-political changes, environmental concerns, and the COVID-19 pandemic – have greatly influenced cultural dynamics worldwide. Therefore, “Culture 21 Plus”⁴² is the forthcoming framework built upon previous instruments such as Agenda 21 for Culture, Culture 21 Actions, and the Rome Charter. Scheduled for adoption in 2025, the framework aims to further embed culture as a central pillar in sustainable development and local governance.

The document is structured around six thematic blocks—Rights, Communities, Prosperity, Territories, Nature, and Governance—each of which addresses a critical dimension of the relationship between culture and sustainability. Within these blocks, 30 key areas provide a comprehensive reference for local and regional governments seeking to assess and evolve their cultural policies.

A notable innovation of Culture 21 Plus is its alignment with the UCLG's “Pact for the Future of Humanity”, particularly its emphasis on people, planet, and participatory governance. The

⁴² For more information, see: Agenda 21 for Culture, *FAQs on Culture in the SDGs* (n.d.), https://agenda21culture.net/sites/default/files/faqs_-_report_-_en.pdf.

framework is currently being tested through pilot applications in cities including Jinju, Lisbon, Mexico City, Elefsina, and İzmir.

1.7. The 2020 Rome Charter and the Cultural Rights

The 2020 Rome Charter on Cultural Rights is a landmark document that reaffirms and promotes the right to participate fully and freely in cultural life as a fundamental human right. Developed through a collaboration between the Municipality of Rome and cities, local governments and their associations around the world⁴³, the UCLG Committee on Culture, and numerous international partners, it was launched in October 2020 amid COVID-19 pandemic crisis, during which lockdowns and social distancing caused a decline in face-to-face interaction and collective cultural experiences. Socially, the crisis intensified existing inequalities in access to culture while also reinforcing the value of culture as a means of expression, solidarity and resilience during isolation.

The pandemic reignited discussions on the need for inclusive, participatory, and sustainable cultural policies as well as the necessity of strengthening culture's position within urban recovery strategies. The Charter aims to guide cities and local governments toward more inclusive, equitable, and culture-centered urban development.

*“We, the people, are the city. Through our beliefs, values and creative activities – our culture – we shape the city of stones and dreams. For better and for worse, it is the embodiment of our individual and shared imagination. Our city must support every inhabitant to develop their human potential and contribute to the communities of which all are part.”*⁴⁴

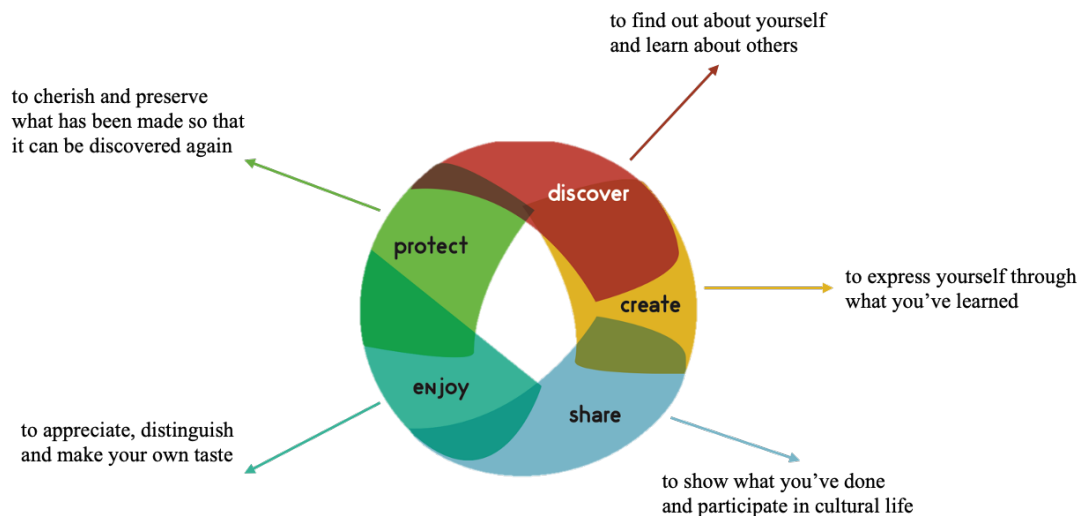
The Rome Charter places culture at the center of urban democracy and sustainability. The opening phrase of the Charter emphasizes the crucial role of citizens in shaping the cultural

⁴³ United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), *Rome Charter: Cultural Rights in the City*, 2020, 13, https://agenda21culture.net/sites/default/files/2020_rc_eng_0.pdf.

⁴⁴ United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), *The 2020 Rome Charter: The Right to Participate in Cultural Life* (Rome: UCLG Committee on Culture and City of Rome, 2020), <https://www.2020romecharter.org/>.

and social fabric of urban environments. It acknowledges that everyone, regardless of their background, has the right to access, participate in, contribute to, and enjoy culture in their daily lives. It specifically targets cities, local and regional governments, cultural organizations, and civil society. It serves as a practical tool to assist policymakers and practitioners in integrating cultural rights into planning, budgeting, and program design, focusing on five cultural rights that local governments are encouraged to promote and protect:

Figure 1.2. Cultural Capabilities of The Rome Charter



(Source: UCLG, *the 2020 Rome Charter: The Right to Participate in Cultural Life*, UCLG Committee on Culture and City of Rome, 2020.)

- The right to access culture: guaranteeing that individuals can freely experience cultural expressions, heritage, and spaces.
- The right to participate in cultural life: establishing opportunities for people to actively engage with and co-create culture.
- The right to create: safeguarding the freedom of artistic and cultural expression from censorship and discrimination.
- The right to learn and know: promoting access to cultural education, history, and memory in inclusive ways.

- The right to contribute to cultural policies: empowering individuals and communities to co-design and influence cultural governance and policies.

1.8. Civil Society: A Driving Force for a Better Cultural Governance

It is also worth mentioning here the definition of “civil society” adopted in this study, is as defined by UNESCO’s Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions (2005), civil society is constituted by “non-governmental organizations, non-profit organizations, professionals in the culture sector and associated sectors, groups that support the work of artists and cultural communities” as well as communities and citizens acting individually and collectively.

Civil society has a key role in carrying out the 2005 Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions: “As agents of change, civil society organizations can drive the implementation of the Convention to ensure that the concerns of artists and cultural professionals are heard and that they have the means to create, produce, disseminate, distribute and access diverse cultural expressions. They can also influence global debates and processes by actively participating in the meetings of the governing bodies.”⁴⁵ One of the important features of this document is that it grants status to civil society.

Within the scope of culture and civil society, another term frequently used in this thesis is “independent” which generally refers to cultural actors, organizations, or initiatives that operate autonomously without direct control or significant influence from governments, political entities, or corporate interests. Independence in this context often implies:

⁴⁵ UNESCO, “Civil Society Organizations,” *Diversity of Cultural Expressions*, <https://www.unesco.org/creativity/en/partners-and-networks/civil-society-organizations>.

- Financial autonomy involves relying on various funding sources, including grants, donations, crowdfunding, and self-generated income, rather than being entirely dependent on government subsidies or corporate sponsorship.
- Decision-making freedom: the ability to establish one's own agendas, artistic visions, and operational strategies without external pressure.
- Artistic and intellectual freedom involves the ability to create, express, and engage in critical discourse without censorship or ideological limitations.
- Grassroots and community-focused: typically arising from civic initiatives, independent cultural actors often emphasize participatory governance, community engagement, and bottom-up strategies.
- Flexibility, survival, and innovation involve operating with a dynamic, adaptive structure while often experimenting with new models of cultural production, governance, and collaboration.

In the context of cultural governance and civil society, independent cultural actors play a vital role in promoting pluralism, inclusivity, and alternative narratives, often addressing gaps left by state-run or commercial cultural institutions. Their contributions can be categorized into several key areas:

- Advocacy and policy influence: civil society and independent cultural actors advocate for transparent, participatory, and democratic decision-making in cultural policies. They often act as watchdogs, monitoring government policies and actions and holding the government accountable.
- They act as intermediaries between citizens and policymakers, promoting cultural democracy and participation. They bridge gaps between local governments and communities by facilitating grassroots cultural engagement, ensuring that cultural policies reflect local needs and aspirations.

- Cultural placemaking and local identity: they highlight and preserve local heritage and intangible cultural practices. They create narratives around cultural identities, contributing to a sense of belonging in urban spaces. A good example of this is the Kadifekale neighborhood initiatives where independent artists and NGOs collaborated with local communities to promote storytelling, music, and crafts, linking cultural heritage with social development.
- By providing alternative cultural spaces, they create independent hubs that operate outside of governmental or commercial constraints, offering alternative artistic expressions. These spaces often provide affordable venues for emerging artists and marginalized communities.

Collaboration between local governments, civil society, and independent cultural actors is essential for effective cultural governance in cities. These actors bring diverse voices, participatory mechanisms, and innovative approaches that enrich the cultural life of cities and make governance more inclusive and sustainable.

EVOLUTION OF THE CIVIL SOCIETY AS AN EMERGING ACTOR OF CULTURAL GOVERNANCE IN İZMİR

This chapter will first provide brief background information on the history and culture of İzmir as one of the most crucial port cities in the Mediterranean for centuries. Then, it will focus on the developments that have taken place in the field of arts and culture in the past fifteen years, fueled by the İzmir Culture Workshop organized by İMM in 2009 by reviewing and analyzing on a linear timeline, the key milestones that made possible the shaping of an peculiar model of cultural governance for İzmir and played a crucial role in the emergence and strengthening of civil society as an independent actor in the field of arts and culture. Finally, it will introduce the major independent art and culture initiatives and collectives that emerged throughout this process of cultural revitalization in the city.

2.1. Brief History and Culture in İzmir

For centuries, port cities have been hotspots for the concentration of people, economic power, and social and cultural capital, serving as a significant catalyst for globalization, particularly among the Mediterranean ports that have played an important role in the emergence of a “world economic system”. The growth of commercial ties has led to the development of cultural connections, resulting in prosperous port towns founded on the principles of openness, inclusivity, and interconnectivity. “Until the advance of modern means of communication, ports were pre-eminent sites where external influences from far beyond the Mediterranean Sea entered the societies bordering it. Porosity is an intrinsic quality of port cities and a *conditio sine qua non* for their survival.”⁴⁶

⁴⁶Henk Driessen, “Mediterranean Port Cities: Cosmopolitanism Reconsidered”, *History and Anthropology* 16, no. 1 (2005): 129–141.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

As one of the most crucial port cities in the Mediterranean region, through which Eastern and Western trade routes passed, İzmir has long been a capital of commerce and culture at the intersection of Aegean, Mediterranean, and Anatolian civilizations- a melting pot of diverse cultures founded on mutual respect and an established culture of living together. In the early 1600s, Venetian, Dutch, English, and French merchants began to settle in İzmir, primarily relying on Jewish, Greek, Armenian, and Muslim intermediaries.⁴⁷ This rich mix of culture, religion, and language in İzmir, along with the growth of global commerce, fostered the development of tolerance and openness in society, allowing İzmir to flourish culturally.

Commercial and industrial growth in the late 19th and early 20th centuries forced these ports, which had once been vibrant hubs of culture and commerce during the 18th and 19th centuries, to expand beyond the seaport centers where space was scarce and compressed between the sea and mountains. Meanwhile, the rise of nationalism, driven by the economic and political constraints of the Balkan Wars of 1912–1913 and the First World War, led to the rapid decline of cultural amalgamation in Mediterranean port cities. This jeopardized İzmir’s inter-communal tolerance, interaction, and trade.⁴⁸ Additionally, these cities, which had been economically and culturally rich until the 20th century, were adversely affected by the shift of production to the East during the post-industrial period, innovations in transportation technologies, and the rise of the information and service sectors. They have been overshadowed by capital cities and/or metropolises that made a quicker transition to the knowledge economy and emerged as centers for finance, tourism, and technology. Consequently, there has been a brain drain toward big cities, and like many others, İzmir’s cultural, social, and economic life has consequently dulled to some extent.

In addition to its rich history, it is worth noting that the urban settlement pattern around the bay in İzmir resembles an amphitheater, and the connection to the sea significantly influences how the residents experience life in general.⁴⁹ Their relationship with the sea- being able to

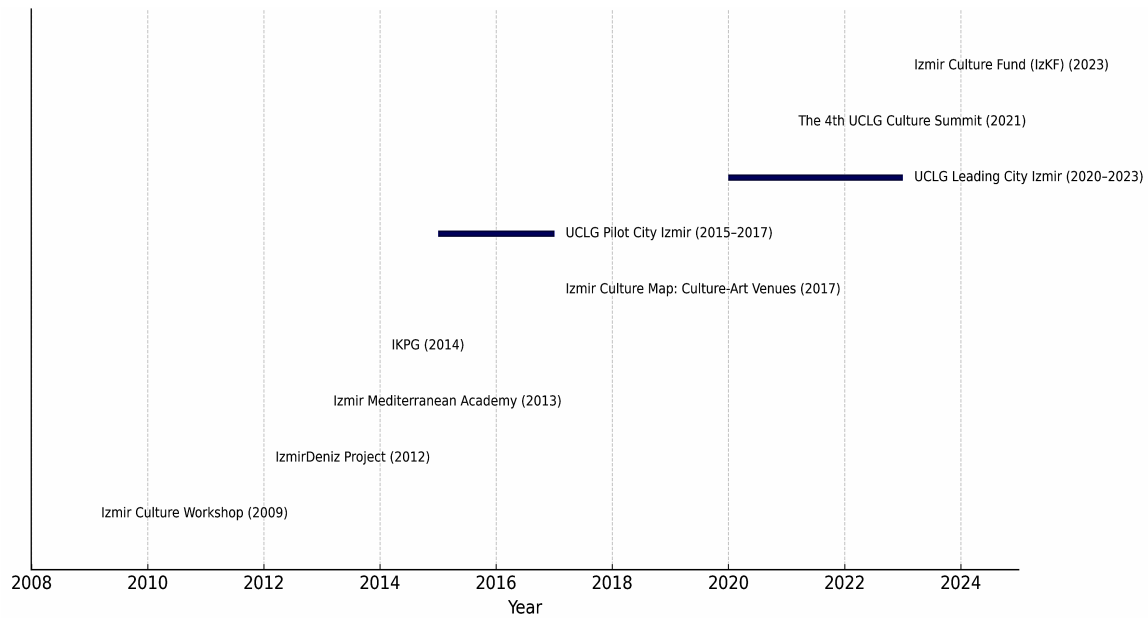
⁴⁹ İlhan Tekeli, *İzmir İçin Kamu Alanı ve Kent Düzeyinde Bir Komünite Oluşturma Stratejisi* (İzmir: İzmir Büyükşehir Belediyesi, 2020), 43.

view it from afar from almost everywhere in the city, crossing over and even swimming in it, plays a crucial role in maintaining low-stress levels. Thanks to the mild Aegean climate, cultural practices in İzmir have long favored the use of outdoor and public spaces (such as streets, squares, seaside, and balconies) for socializing, entertainment, and celebrations, which foster the values of sharing and community. The people of İzmir are well-known for prioritizing a balanced approach to work and leisure, allowing more time for relaxation, socializing, taking things slowly, and enjoying the present moment, which can sometimes lead to a state of inertia. The latter has been first described as “rahatsız edici bir rahatlığımız var” (we are disturbingly comfort-seeking) by the participants of the İKPG Summer School in 2017, which expresses a certain sense of comfort-seeking way of life and tranquility that comes with being from İzmir, which can sometimes be unsettling for others.

2.2. Key Historical Milestones: Towards An İzmir Model of Cultural Governance

This section will focus on the development processes of cultural governance and the organizational capacity of civil society in the cultural and arts sector in İzmir between 2009 and 2024.

Figure 2.1. Timeline of Cultural Governance Milestones in İzmir (2009-2024)



This timeline illustrates the significant milestones in İzmir's cultural governance between 2009 and 2024. It includes the launch of participatory programs, international recognitions, institutional developments, and public cultural initiatives that have contributed to shaping the city's cultural policy landscape.

2.2.1. İzmir Culture Workshop: A First Step for a Participatory Culture Strategy (2009)

The İzmir Culture Workshop marks the first step of developing participatory practices of cultural governance in İzmir over the last fifteen years.

İzmir Metropolitan Municipality (İMM) organized the Culture Workshop on October 24, 2009, aiming to reposition İzmir as a national and international metropolis of culture, art, and design, particularly among the Mediterranean port cities. In this process, the İMM adopted a participatory approach by inviting approximately one hundred culture actors, including

artists, academics, industry professionals, and civil society representatives from various fields, to collaboratively think about and explore ways to enhance İzmir's cultural infrastructure and activities. This effort aimed to instill a planned vibrancy in the city's cultural life and to encourage the development of creative and cultural production.

Field research was conducted to identify the dynamics of the cultural and artistic environment in İzmir, the shortcomings of the existing cultural infrastructure, and the key issues and needs of the cultural actors.

The preliminary research findings indicated that although the physical capacity of the cultural and artistic venues was quite sufficient (in numbers), particularly in the city center, the structural characteristics of some venues were incompatible with the cultural and artistic functions they were expected to serve. In addition to structural issues, it has been observed that in some of these venues, efforts to develop cultural and artistic content and programs were inadequate due to a lack of trained cultural managers specialized in cultural planning, their functions were not clearly defined, and some units remained underutilized or were being used for purposes other than their intended activities.⁵⁰

On the other hand, while İzmir possessed a rich cultural infrastructure and diverse stakeholders in culture and the arts, it was observed that communication and collaboration among these actors had not yet achieved the desired level. Insufficient dialogue and cooperation existed both within institutions and among individuals, creating an obstacle to establishing large-scale collectively shared goals and developing a city-wide cultural planning strategy.

Furthermore, the declining interest of the private sector in supporting and investing in cultural events over time has limited local cultural organizations' ability to produce art and ensure long-term sustainability, thereby weakening the presence of civil society. As a result, civil

⁵⁰ For more on the research findings see: İzmir Metropolitan Municipality, *İzmir Kültür Çalıştay Kitabı* (İzmir: İzmir Metropolitan Municipality, 2010).

society's organizational capacity in the cultural and artistic field has remained low in the city, leading many independent initiatives to face challenges in becoming permanent structures.

Six group workshops were conducted to identify the necessary priorities for cultural strategy planning: “Cultural Policies”, “Theatre-Literature-Cinema”, “Visual Arts and Music”, “Cultural Heritage”, “Urban Design” and “Cultural Industries”. The results of the first topic are crucial for this study, as cultural policies provide an umbrella perspective that influences all the others and will also shape their outcomes.

The major priorities highlighted by the Cultural Policies group can be summarized as follows:

- Conducting ongoing studies to uncover the potential of culture and the arts in the city’s sustainable development and creating information-driven policies.
- Adopting a participatory governance approach that engages citizens as active participants in the policy-making process.
- Establish a multi-stakeholder İzmir Culture and Arts Council and an “Urban Academy”^{*} to conduct scientific research.
- Developing strategies to become an active member of the Mediterranean Cities Network while encouraging networking and collaboration among port cities.
- Transforming the municipality's mission from content creation to capacity-building in culture and the arts.

Overall, the Culture Workshop established three pillars upon which the future of the city will be built:

- the first was to transform İzmir into a city of innovation and design
- the second aimed to advance this vision by leveraging international connections, particularly with Mediterranean cities

^{*} This idea of a multi-stakeholder Culture Council has evolved and led to the establishment of the İzmir Mediterranean Academy.

- the third focused on reinforcing this vision through democratic and participatory practices.

Reflecting on it, the Culture Workshop was a successful first step by the Municipality in paving the way for ongoing developments in both the institutional and civil sectors of arts and culture, elevating the city to a different level over nearly a decade.⁵¹

2.2.2. İzmirDeniz (*İzmir Bay Area Design Project*): An Urban Design Project with a Cultural Aspect (2012)

The number of large cities and metropolitan areas is increasing globally, leading to denser populations and widening cultural disparities. Urban space is becoming more intensively utilized. With the increasing mobility of city residents, there is a heightened necessity for a bottom-up urban design and culture to adapt to the lifestyles of these new urban dwellers. And İzmir is no exception to this trend.

The sea is the defining element that makes İzmir unique and plays a central role in shaping the city's quality of life. A key factor in creating a peaceful and quite lifestyle in İzmir is the relationship between its residents and the sea.⁵² In this regard, the İzmirDeniz project was initiated by İMM in 2012 to develop an urban design strategy aimed at strengthening residents' connection with the Bay of İzmir, ensuring a more equitable distribution of quality of life within society.

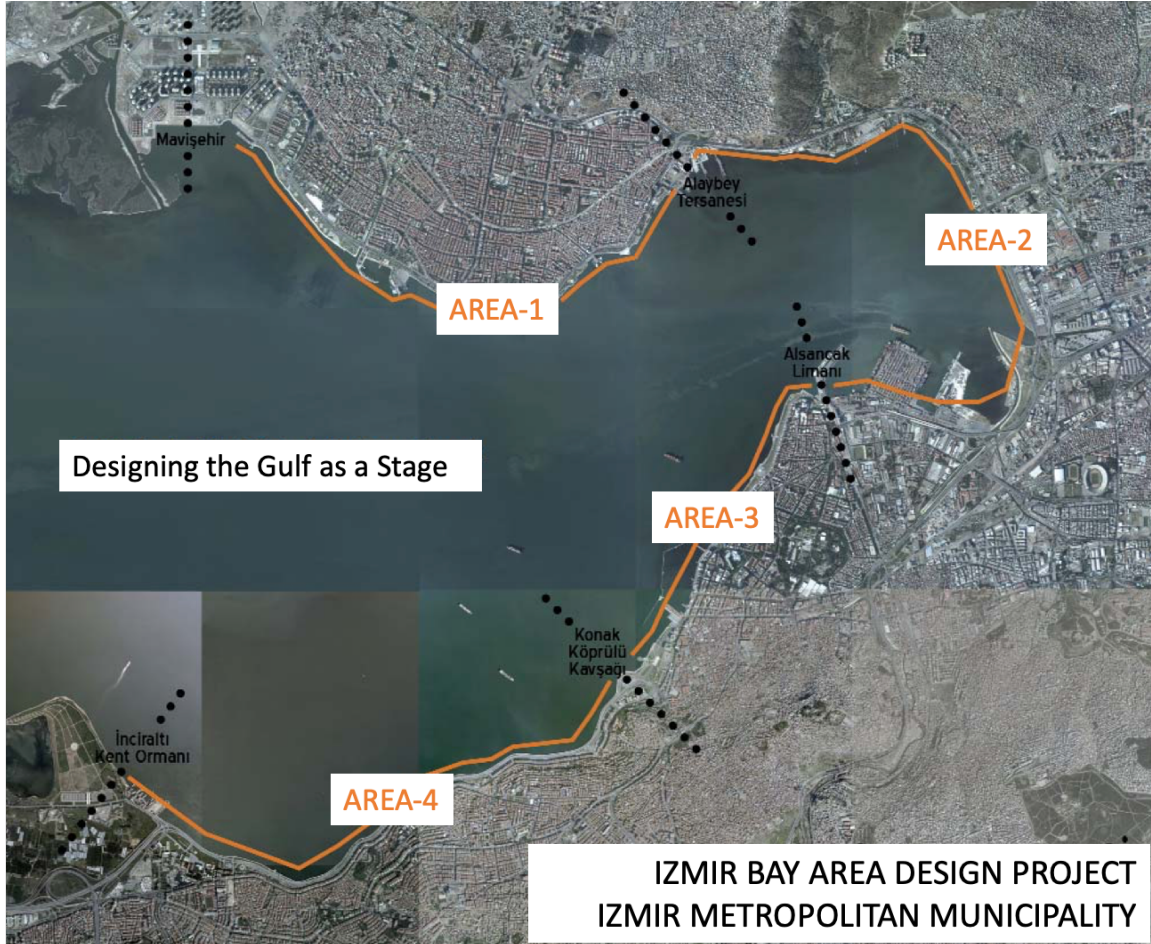
Nearly a hundred architects, designers and urban planners collaborated for a year, dividing the coastline into four urban planning areas: Karşıyaka, Bayraklı, Konak-Alsancak, and Güzelyalı. Conceptual architectural and industrial design projects were developed for these

⁵¹ For more on the İzmir Culture Workshop see, İzmir Metropolitan Municipality, *İzmir Kültür Çalıştayı Kitabı* (İzmir: İzmir Metropolitan Municipality, 2010).

⁵² İlhan Tekeli, *İzmirlilerin Denizle İlişisini Güçlendirme Projesi: Tasarım Stratejisi Raporu* (İzmir: İzmir Büyükşehir Belediyesi İzmir Akdeniz Akademisi, 2012), https://www.izmirdeniz.com/CKYuklenen/dokumanlar/kiyi_tasarim_tasarim_stratejisi.pdf.

coastal areas, improving access to the sea, reorganizing pedestrian walkways, motorways, and bike lanes, and proposing new arrangements for urban furniture.⁵³

Figure 2.2. İzmir Bay Area Design Project – Urban Planning Areas



(Source: *İzmir Büyükşehir Belediyesi, Kıyı Tasarımı Tasarım Stratejisi*)

⁵³ İlhan Tekeli, *İzmirliilerin Denizle İlişisini Güçlendirme Projesi: Tasarım Stratejisi Raporu* (İzmir: İzmir Büyükşehir Belediyesi, İzmir Akdeniz Akademisi, 2012), https://www.izmirdeniz.com/CKYuklenen/dokumanlar/kiyi_tasarim_tasarim_stratejisi.pdf.

A fifth team, the Culture Working Group, focused on the cultural dimension of the İzmirDeniz project, approaching the Bay as both a symbolic and functional stage for artistic and civic engagement. While imagining the sea as a central component of İzmir’s everyday life, the Group came up with a motto, “take İzmir to the Mediterranean and let the Mediterranean flow into İzmir”.⁵⁴

They formulated a comprehensive set of proposals designed to revitalize the relationship between residents and the coastline through participatory cultural programming. This initiative has sought to enhance local capacity through the effective utilization of existing urban resources, the creation of spaces for spontaneously emerging activities, and the encouragement of an amateur spirit. Rather than prioritizing high-budget productions, the Culture Working Group has concentrated on fostering initiatives that significantly depend on artistic and human contributions. This approach aspires to empower community-driven cultural expression and guarantee inclusivity in cultural participation.

Their proposals included festivals, parades, and processions designed not only for spectatorship but also for active public involvement, inviting residents to engage with public spaces that connect the streets and the sea (for example, see the designated procession routes and gathering points for the proposed Hıdırellez⁵⁵ parade in Figures 2.3a-b-c below).

⁵⁴ Serhan Ada, “Başkan’dan”, *İzmir Akdeniz Akademisi* (website), August 2023. Originally published at <https://akdenizakademisi.org/>, no longer accessible. Copy on file with the author.

⁵⁵ As outlined in the İzmirDeniz project *Performances and Events Technical Specification* document, the *Hıdırellez: People's Festivity* was designed as a city-wide participatory event beginning with simultaneous parades from several key meeting points. The concept of the Festival inspired by the flight of the Phoenix (*Anka Kuşu*), was developed with the vision of “İzmir as a city reborn from its ashes”, emphasizing regeneration, hope, and collective celebration. Organized as a torchlight procession moving from the city’s major traffic arteries toward the coastline, the event included a pre-arranged cortège order featuring various performance groups. Street performers, both local and international—particularly from Mediterranean countries—were to present their acts on decorated trailers. The content of these performances would be co-created through workshops conducted with İzmir-based artists. A key emphasis of the event was on public participation and interaction throughout the parade. The objective of the floating fire towers performance was to guide the public’s attention from land to sea during the celebration and to create a collective experience of joyful observation. Inspired by the traditional Hıdırellez bonfire ritual, these monumental floating structures—referred to as “yanaryüzer” (*floating flames*)—transform the symbolic element of fire into a striking visual spectacle. The towers were to be constructed at a scale large enough to be visible not only from the shoreline but also from

Seasonal programming was central to this vision: the Group sought to map existing patterns of cultural activity across the city and to develop strategies for their balanced distribution throughout the year. The inner bay was envisioned as an amphitheater, with the water surface itself proposed as a stage for open-air performances and collective gatherings.

Figure 2.3.a Hidrellez Parade Procession Routes



(Source: *İzmirDeniz Project: Performances and Events Technical Specification*)

Figure 2.3.b Hidrellez Parade Procession Routes



(Source: *İzmirDeniz Project: Performances and Events Technical Specification*)

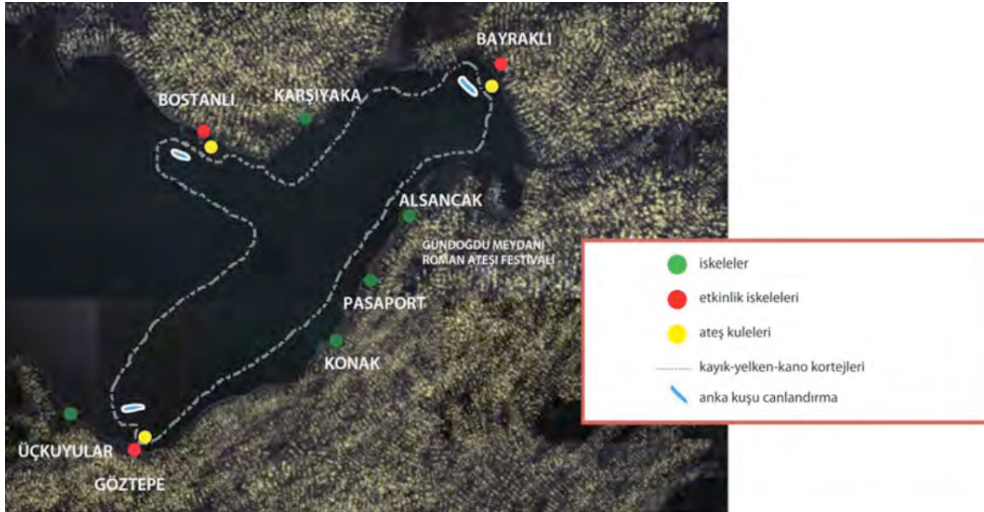
elevated viewpoints across the city, allowing the entire public to witness and partake in the festivities. (İzmir Metropolitan Municipality, *İzmirDeniz Project: Performances and Events Technical Specification*, unpublished internal document prepared by the Culture Working Group, İzmir, 2012. Copy on file with the author.)

Figure 2.3.c Hidrellez Parade Gathering Points



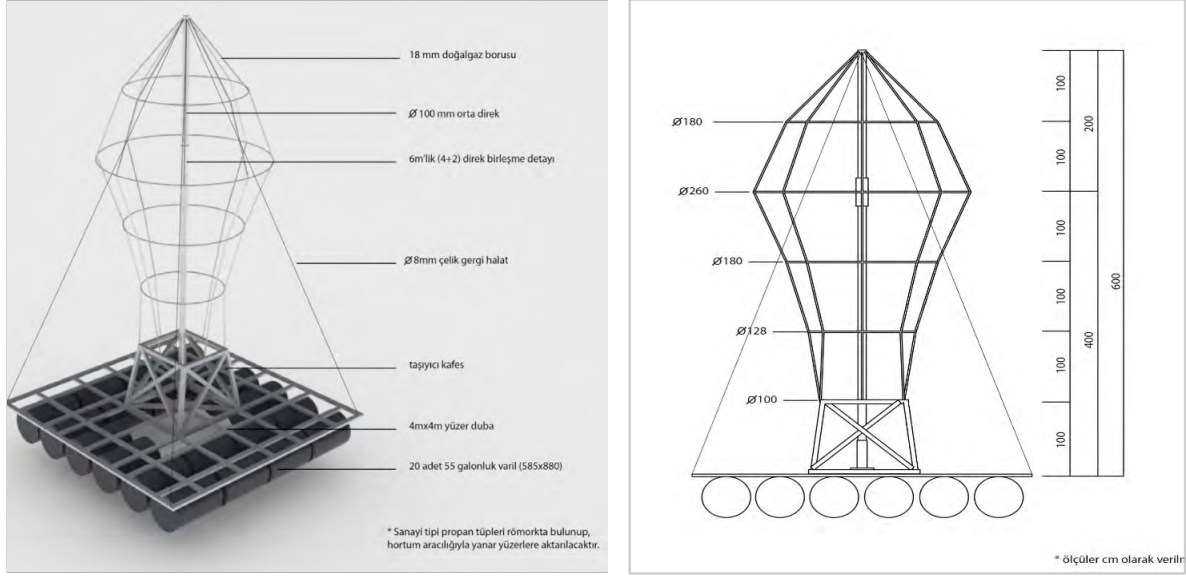
(Source: *İzmirDeniz Project: Performances and Events Technical Specification*)

Figure 2.3.d Phoenix Themed Projection Show and Vessel Convoy Illustration



(Source: *İzmirDeniz Project: Performances and Events Technical Specification*)

Figure 2.4. Design of Floating Flames for the Hıdırellez Festival



(Source: *İzmirDeniz Project: Performances and Events Technical Specification*)

Complementary efforts addressed infrastructural and spatial needs⁵⁶, such as promoting civic participation in water-based recreation, facilitating hand-line fishing, and improving access along the coastal bicycle path. The Group also contributed to the design of communication elements, including signage to mark heritage sites and floating platforms for events held on water. A festival model highlighting İzmir's Mediterranean identity and aiming for international visibility was proposed, along with a governance structure to support the long-term sustainability of cultural activities.

The process was developed through a sequence of research and design stages. Initial efforts involved fieldwork—comprising surveys, interviews, and site visits—to assess potential venues, observe public usage patterns, and identify user needs. These findings informed the subsequent design phase, during which specific event models and logistical tools were

⁵⁶ Sarp Keskiner, "City's Cultural Scene: İzmir Bay" in *İzmir Culture Workshop: Reference Document*, İZMEDA (İzmir Mediterranean Academy), n.d., 26, 2025, https://www.izmeda.org/Upload_Files/FckFiles/file/IZMIRCULTURE_TEK.pdf.

developed. The overall approach emphasized inclusivity, spatial equity, and the integration of cultural planning within broader urban strategies.

The proposed governance model⁵⁷ centered around the creation of the İZMİRKÜLTÜR Civil Society Initiative*, envisioned as a platform that would coordinate cultural activities along İzmir's coastline and inner bay while ensuring the active participation of independent cultural actors, civil society organizations, and local communities. Framed as both an operational and strategic body, the initiative was expected to support year-round programming, foster cross-sector collaboration, and act as a bridge between cultural producers and municipal units. Emphasizing inclusivity, local ownership, and the integration of creative industries into urban development, the model seeks to go beyond symbolic participation by enabling diverse stakeholders—ranging from artists and designers to educators, cooperatives, and informal cultural groups—to contribute to shaping İzmir's cultural landscape in alignment with its Mediterranean identity.

This work emphasizes the importance of utilizing the city's existing cultural resources, featuring artistic and human-intensive contributions, such as workshops that engage locals, youth, and children in the artistic production process. Consequently, it requires relatively lower budgets compared to grand events, creates a platform for knowledge sharing and collaboration, and fosters an amateur spirit to develop local capacity.

In this context, the Culture Working Group not only proposed events and activities but also supported design groups' projects in incorporating culture and existing cultural resources into their design processes. This engagement served as a mediating effort that embedded architectural interventions within broader frameworks of social interaction and urban inclusion, encouraging the use of public spaces, enabling spontaneous encounters and social

⁵⁷ Serhan Ada, Şervan Alpşen, Başak Işıklar, and Sarp Keskiner, *İzmir Büyükşehir Belediyesi, Kültür ve Sanat Faaliyetleri (2004–2017) Değerlendirme Raporu* (İzmir: İzmir Büyükşehir Belediyesi, December 2017).

* The term “İZMİRKÜLTÜR Civil Society Initiative” was used for the first time in the presentation made on 28 March 2012 and suggested by Serhan Ada.

interactions among communities, addressing social inequalities between the center and disadvantaged neighborhoods, facilitating access to cultural events, and enhancing the visibility of cultural events in the city. As Colin Mercer stated, “*cultural planning is the strategic and integral use of cultural resources in urban and community development.*”⁵⁸

İMM has also implemented a new strategy for funding the İzmirDeniz project by securing equal contributions from sixteen private companies based in İzmir. This method has facilitated the involvement of economic stakeholders in the city's ongoing design and cultural planning processes, even if indirectly.

According to urban planner Hasibe Velibeyoğlu, who served as the Head of the Urban Design and City Aesthetics Department at İMM and also acted as the coordinator of the İzmirDeniz project, one of the significant aspects of this project was the integration of new implementation tools into the design process. Rather than jumping directly into designing a large-scale urban project, a strategic design framework was first developed. This was followed by the creation of a design guide specifically for the coastal areas. From the outset, all project teams presented their proposals to one another, encouraging mutual exchange and aiming for coherence across the broader scheme. The final design was the outcome of a collective effort not only by designers, but once it reached a certain level of maturity, the outcome was shared with the public and opened up for feedback and critique from different segments of society. For these qualities, the İzmirDeniz project was awarded the 2015 Raci Bademli Good Practice Award by the Turkish Chamber of City Planners (TMMOB). The most notable feature of the İzmirDeniz project, however, was the integration of urban design and culture through a unified approach, creating a holistic urban strategy.⁵⁹

İzmirDeniz is a long-term urban initiative that has been ongoing for nearly a decade—a notable continuity, particularly within the context of metropolitan cities and the institutional

⁵⁸ Colin Mercer, “Cultural Planning for Urban Development and Creative Cities” (2006), https://www.kulturplan-oresund.dk/pdf/Shanghai_cultural_planning_paper.pdf.

⁵⁹ İzmir Büyükşehir Belediyesi İzmir Akdeniz Akademisi, *İzmirliilerin Denizle İlişkisini Güçlendirme Projesi: Tasarım Stratejisi Raporu* (İzmir: İzmir Büyükşehir Belediyesi, 2012), https://www.izmirdeniz.com/CKYuklenen/dokumanlar/kiyi_tasarim_tasarim_stratejisi.pdf.

dynamics of Türkiye, where project interruptions are common. Guided by the Design Strategy Report for Strengthening İzmir's Relationship with the Sea, the project was implemented between 2012 and 2020 along a 40-kilometer stretch of coastline, covering over one million square meters of public waterfront space. While many components of the project were successfully implemented, others could not be realized due to issues with institutional coordination, legal constraints, and conflicting priorities among different public bodies. These challenges reflect common difficulties encountered in large-scale urban transformation initiatives.⁶⁰

2.2.3. An Independent Urban Think-Tank Platform: İzmir Mediterranean Academy (2013)

The İzmir Mediterranean Academy (izmeda.org), established as a tangible outcome of the Culture Workshop, has operated as a semi-autonomous branch of the İMM since 2012, serving as both a think-tank and a democratic platform for culture.

According to the recommendations of the Cultural Policy Group within the İzmirDeniz project, the İzmir Mediterranean Academy was envisioned as an independent and flexible civic institution grounded in participatory principles. Its identity, mandate, and long-term direction were shaped through input from artists and cultural actors in İzmir. The Academy was intended to function as an intermediary body that would foster communication and collaboration among diverse stakeholders, supporting İzmir's strategic vision of becoming a "Mediterranean center of culture, art, and design".

The İzmir Mediterranean Academy Culture and Arts Board convened on 16 November 2013 at the Ahmed Adnan Saygun Art Center. Moderated by coordinator Serhan Ada, the meeting brought together academics, artists, and cultural professionals, alongside staff members of the Academy. The session aimed to evaluate the Academy's Culture and Arts coordination

⁶⁰ Hasibe Velibeyoğlu, "Birlikte Tasarlama Deneyimi: İzmirDeniz Projesi", *Yeniden Akdeniz – Tasarım*, December 2020 (İzmir: İzmir Akdeniz Akademisi Yayını), 20–23, https://www.izmeda.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/yeniden_akdeniz_tasarim_S01_Spread.pdf.

program, define the working principles of the Board, and conduct a preliminary discussion for the development of future projects in the field of culture and the arts.

The main goals aimed to ensure the sustainable cultural development of İzmir by empowering civil society members in the cultural sphere and introducing a new governance model for culture. The specific goals⁶¹ included the following:

- To establish a democratic platform and think-tank focused on implementing research, cultural strategies, and community building in İzmir,
- To establish a vibrant institution that fosters the development of new ideas and projects through the involvement of cultural actors, civil society, and other stakeholders,
- To enhance cultural mobility in the Mediterranean by bringing together international cultural actors,
- To ensure culture is accessible to all segments of society,
- To promote democratic and participatory practices while emphasizing sustainability, creativity, ecology, and heritage,
- Develop collaborative cultural strategies and policies, acting as a bridge between local government and the public.

In 2023, the Academy celebrated its 10th anniversary. During the first quarter of the year, the organization underwent a restructuring process by reassessing its founding principles in participatory meetings. A newly appointed Academy Board, composed of fifteen local and Mediterranean (France, Lebanon, Portugal, Croatia) members, has begun working on an enhanced vision within the context of “circular culture”, rethinking İzmir's role in the Mediterranean concerning its relationships with nature, its past and heritage, and its future.⁶²

⁶¹ Ayşegül Sabuktay, *İzmir Mediterranean Academy as a Model of Governance of Culture* (İzmir: İzmir Mediterranean Academy, 2019), 3. https://www.agenda21culture.net/sites/default/files/izmir_eng.pdf

⁶² İzmir Akdeniz Akademisi, *Danışma Kurulu Toplantı Notları, 16 Kasım 2013*, unpublished document in author's personal collection.

The Academy organizes national and international symposiums, conferences, panels, talks, workshops, forums, and exhibitions; publishes and distributes data and information through books, periodicals, journals, and magazines; conducts capacity-building programs such as summer schools for cultural actors and seminars on ecology, history, and culture in the Mediterranean; and manages the coordination and execution of local and international initiatives like Good Design İzmir, UCLG Agenda 21 for Culture Pilot Cities, and Leading Cities programs.

Since September 2023, the Academy has been hosting the “I’m New to İzmir...” series, held every Tuesday evening at its premises in the Kemeraltı district. These conversational gatherings welcome newcomers—individuals who have recently moved to İzmir from various cities and countries—to share their experiences of the city, fostering cultural exchange and mutual understanding among participants. The meetings not only provide a space for reflection and dialogue but also create opportunities for networking and spontaneous encounters, enabling participants to connect, with long-time residents, and with the city’s cultural and historical landscape.

“Meltem”⁶³ (*Breeze*), published by the Academy, is an international, peer-reviewed, bilingual periodical that has been in circulation since 2017. Initially released quarterly, the journal later adopted a biannual publication schedule and continues to publish in both Turkish and English.⁶⁴ Beginning with issue 15 (Spring 2024), Meltem entered a new phase that includes plans to expand its linguistic scope to feature online contributions in additional Mediterranean languages, including Arabic, French, and Spanish.⁶⁵

The journal welcomes theoretical, research, and review articles, along with contemporary reviews and essays in political, artistic, social, philosophical, and scientific fields.

⁶³ Meltem: İzmir Akdeniz Akademisi Dergisi, <https://www.meltemizmeda.org/en/Icerik/7>.

⁶⁴ İzmir Mediterranean Academy, *About Meltem*, <https://meltemizmeda.org/en/about/>

⁶⁵ İzmir Mediterranean Academy, *Call for Papers – Issue 15 (Spring 2024)*, <https://meltemizmeda.org/en/call-for-papers/>

The latest addition to the Academy's periodicals, the first issue of Firtına (a name that refers to “*Fortuna*” in Latin and “Fortune” in English, the publication was named after Tyche, the goddess of fortune and prosperity in Greek mythology), was launched in March 2024 and focuses on urban life and culture. It was designed to be produced through collective efforts not only by contributors from İzmir but also from across the Mediterranean, spanning from Venice to Gaza. However, the publication life of Firtına was short-lived due to a decision by the new local administration following the municipal elections, and it ended before its second issue could be published.

The Academy's impacts⁶⁶ on the working practices of local government and cultural actors, along with the key factors contributing to this success, have been acknowledged by Culture21 as a good practice in cultural rights, heritage, diversity, creativity, and governance of culture.⁶⁷ It has been emphasized that:

- It has impacted the methodology and content of the Municipality's policies by enhancing interactions between its departments and with civil society, embracing hybrid forms of decision-making. The main mindset shift has been the tendency to form strategic long-term goals rather than relying on project-based short-term planning.
- Several independent initiatives and platforms emerged (which will be detailed in the following sections), such as kültürLab, İzmir Cultural Pla+form Initiative, and the Cultural Mapping Project, helping the Academy reach a broader audience.

⁶⁶ Ayşegül Sabuktay, *İzmir Mediterranean Academy as a Model of Governance of Culture* (İzmir: İzmir Mediterranean Academy, 2019), 3. https://www.agenda21culture.net/sites/default/files/izmir_eng.pdf

⁶⁷ IMM was a candidate for the third UCLG Mexico City – Culture 21 International Award (November 2017 – May 2018). The international jury finalized its evaluation in June 2018 and recommended that the project be promoted as a good practice by the UCLG Committee on Culture, within the framework of Agenda 21 for Culture.

For further details, see: United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), “İzmir Mediterranean Academy: A Model of Governance for Culture”, *Agenda 21 for Culture – Good Practices*, <https://obs.agenda21culture.net/en/good-practices/%C4%B0zmir-mediterranean-academy-model-governance-culture>

- As the municipality's autonomy decreases in discussions and policy formulation, civil society gains greater freedom in decision-making, feels empowered, and actively participates in the process.

Unique among cultural institutions in Türkiye, the Academy faced administrative challenges during its early foundational period. To overcome these obstacles, it relied heavily on open communication and disseminating information about its operations and activities through various media, including publications, online video broadcasting, radio programs, and social media.

However, it is essential to note that although the Academy's bylaws are ratified by the Metropolitan Municipal Council, they remain an integral part of the municipality's institutional structure. Its role is outlined in the municipality's strategic plan, and its budget is allocated annually by the Municipal Council. This situation makes the Academy and its projects vulnerable to disruptions in continuity should political changes occur.

2.2.4. İzmir Cultural Pla+form Initiative (İKPG): A Civil Initiative in the Field of Culture (2014)

Platforms as forms of civil organization play a unifying role and can be established to gather creative actors in both physical and virtual spaces, forge connections across the cultural, technological, and creative sectors, and cultivate businesses and networks. Additionally, creating platforms helps foster a sense of community.

Before the establishment of the “İzmir Cultural Pla+form Initiative” (İKPG) (*İzmir Kültür Pla+formu Girişimi*), no comprehensive inventory study existed on the identities, areas of activity, and geographical locations of local art and culture practitioners in İzmir. Consequently, suitable channels had not developed for İzmir's culture practitioners to connect and communicate with one another. This absence posed an obstacle to the visibility and recognition of İzmir's culture and art practitioners.

In this context, to establish a collaborative network within İzmir's cultural and artistic community, the concept of the İKPG was developed after nearly two years of work by the Culture and Arts Unit of the Academy. Initiated by five volunteer cultural managers⁶⁸ and artists from diverse backgrounds and disciplines, İKPG began from scratch to create its own independent civic organizational model that embraces a flexible participatory and collective structure, intentionally distancing itself from any hierarchical order that local government decision-makers could impose.⁶⁹

Launched in April 2014, İKPG aimed to foster collaboration, enhance communication, and build solidarity among cultural actors while increasing the visibility of cultural productions in the city. The initiative is grounded in principles of transparency, openness and inclusivity, promoting participation from all individuals and organizations involved in İzmir's cultural and creative scene, referred to as “bileşenler” (*components*).

Since its establishment, İKPG has significantly contributed to creating an environment of dialogue, cooperation, and solidarity among art and culture producers in İzmir through various initiatives such as:

- Monthly communication meetings where components from various disciplines within the arts and creative industries, including artists, collectives, academics, venue owners, publishers, educators, media representatives, and others, can introduce themselves, showcase their works, share knowledge and expertise, discuss challenges, and explore collective solutions. The meetings were recorded in both video and audio formats, and participant details were compiled and published in İKPG's journal, Pla+form, while extensive transcriptions of the recordings were included in the İKPG Annuals. The

⁶⁸ The founding core team of the İzmir Culture Platform Initiative (İKPG) consisted of Borga Kantürk, Sarp Keskiner, Cenker Ekemen, Zeynep Gönen, and Elfin Yüksektepe.

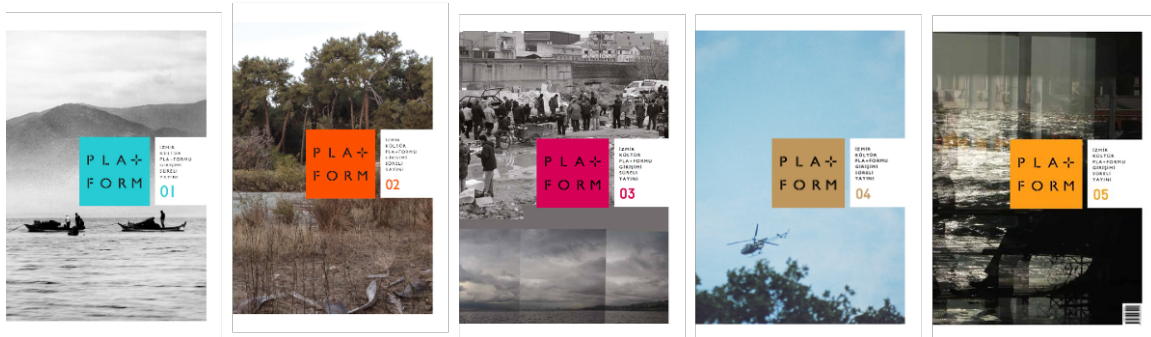
⁶⁹ Sarp Keskiner, statement to the author regarding his participation in the Bosch Alumni Network Culture Clusters event, 2024.

number of İKPG components has increased annually, reaching more than 250 components and 50 stakeholders in 2020.⁷⁰

However, these monthly meetings were disrupted during the COVID-19 pandemic and have not resumed consistently since. Despite the strong initial momentum, the initiative gradually lost its organizational drive, and no significant effort was made to reestablish the gatherings or sustain the collective structure that had previously been developed.

- The “Pla+form” series mentioned above is a periodical that features interviews, articles, and updates on cultural events, documenting the initiative's activities, achievements, and ongoing projects. A total of 15 issues have been published to date, enhancing the visibility of local cultural producers and providing a reference while offering insights into the city's cultural dynamics.

Figure 2.5. Pla+form Series Covers



- Educational programs, including summer schools, seminars, forums⁷¹ and workshops, aimed at fostering cultural engagement and capacity development within the community. A notable example is the capacity-building İKPG Summer School programs organized in

⁷⁰ Sarp Keskiner, “İzmirkültür Pla+Form Initiative in its Sixth Year” in *İzmir Culture Workshop: Reference Document*, İzmir Mediterranean Academy, n.d., 26, 2025, https://www.izmeda.org/Upload_Files/FckFiles/file/IZMIRCULTURE_TEK.pdf.

⁷¹ Sarp Keskiner, statement to the author regarding his participation in the Bosch Alumni Network Culture Clusters event, 2024. He refers to eight thematic forums organized by İKPG between 2016 and 2017, including “A Glance at the Local Music Scene” and “Alternative Local Practices of Learning and Teaching Process in İzmir,” as well as lists international and national collaborators involved in the initiative between 2015 and 2017.

the non-urban regions (Şirince, Seferihisar, Bozdağlar) during 2017, 2018, and 2019. These programs brought together hundreds of components to address and focus on issues such as climate change, the barter economy, gender equality, alternative pedagogy, the invasion of personal spaces, public arts, and equality in access to healthy food and clean water.

The Academy provided full financial support for İKPG. The core team of İKPG, comprising approximately twenty workers in the arts and culture sector, received both logistical and financial support from the Academy. This team was responsible for content creation, organizing events and activities, preparing Pla+form issues and the Annuals, and managing various administrative duties.

İKPG consistently highlighted transdisciplinarity, collaboration, mutual solidarity, and the importance of developing new hybrid models, such as shared microspaces, to help civil actors maintain independence in the arts and culture.

During the pandemic, when organizing the Summer School became impossible, a Winter School was held instead with a smaller core team. This gathering focused on envisioning the future structure of the İKPG, raising questions such as “Should İKPG become a formal NGO?” and “What happens when it has over a thousand members?” The discussions emphasized the platform’s core function as a space for gathering, documenting, and listing cultural initiatives and actors. In a similar effort to explore future possibilities, İKPG convened a meeting with legal experts and practitioners to investigate the potential for forming a cooperative structure. However, the idea was not pursued further due to a lack of collective initiative. Ultimately, a combination of external disruptions—such as the dematerialization of activities during the pandemic, the discontinuation of the platform’s online publication, and structural changes within the Academy—led to a prolonged pause in İKPG’s activities.

2.2.5. Mapping of Culture Venues in İzmir

One of the most significant outcomes of İKPG's work was the creation of the “İzmir Kültür Haritası: Kültür-Sanat Mekânları - 2017” (*İzmir Culture Map: Culture-Art Venues of İzmir - 2017*)⁷².

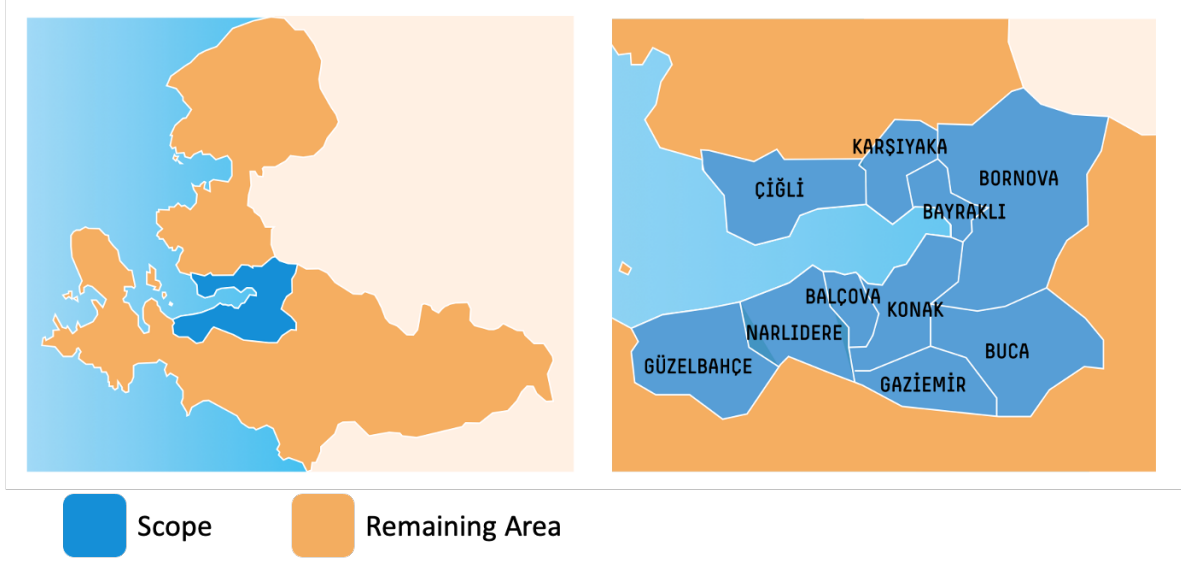
The mapping study aimed to:

- Lay the foundation for the development of bottom-up cultural policies based on data and information,
- Build the infrastructure for creating cultural governance mechanisms at the urban level in partnership with stakeholders,
- Identify opportunities for accessing culture, especially for children, minorities, and refugees, in a city that showcases rich cultural diversity, and propose strategies for enhancing cultural participation,
- Develop an index and a map of operational venues in İzmir's districts to enhance the visibility of the cultural and artistic potential in the periphery.

Initially, the mapping study covered only 11 districts in the city center, which house nearly 69% of the total urban population. It categorized venues as operated by local governments, independent entities, the central government, the private sector, and public spaces.

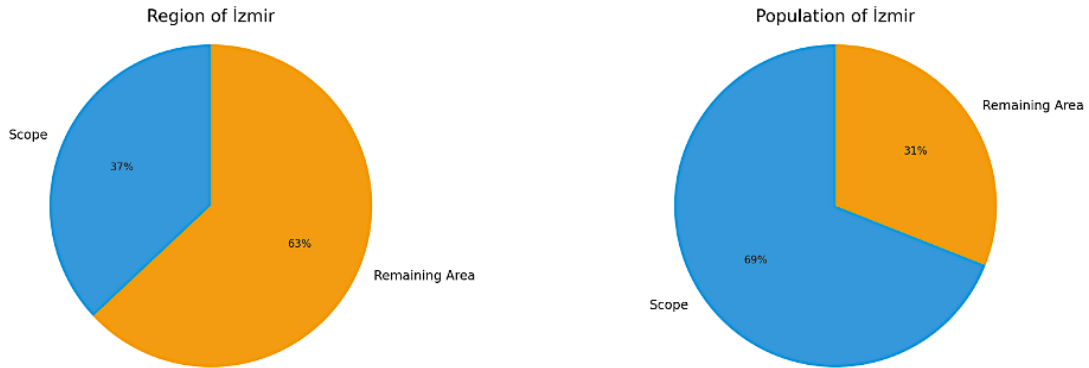
⁷² İzmir Akdeniz Akademisi, *Platform İzmir: Kültür Haritası* (İzmir: İzmir Akdeniz Akademisi, March 2022), <https://www.izmeda.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Platform-izmir-kultur-haritasi.pdf>.

Figure 2.6. Geographic Coverage of the İzmir Cultural Mapping Study



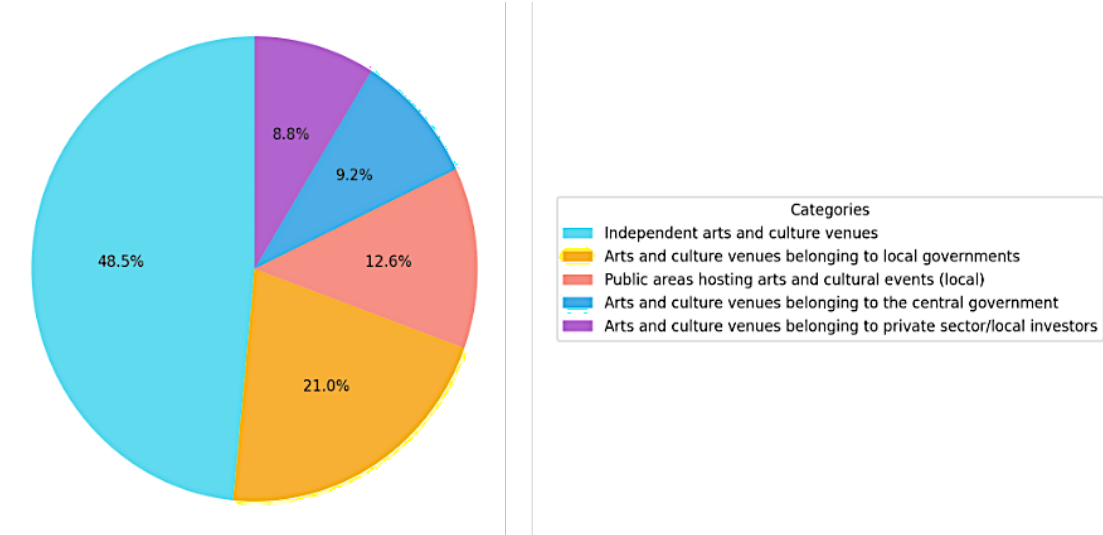
(Source: Data from *İKPG Kültür Haritası – 2017*, İzmir Akdeniz Akademisi, 2022)

Figure 2.7. The Territorial Scope of the Mapping Project and the Population Within and Outside the Scope



(Source: Data from *İKPG Kültür Haritası – 2017*, İzmir Akdeniz Akademisi, (2022), visualization recreated by the author.)

Figure 2.8. Types of Ownership among Cultural Venues in İzmir

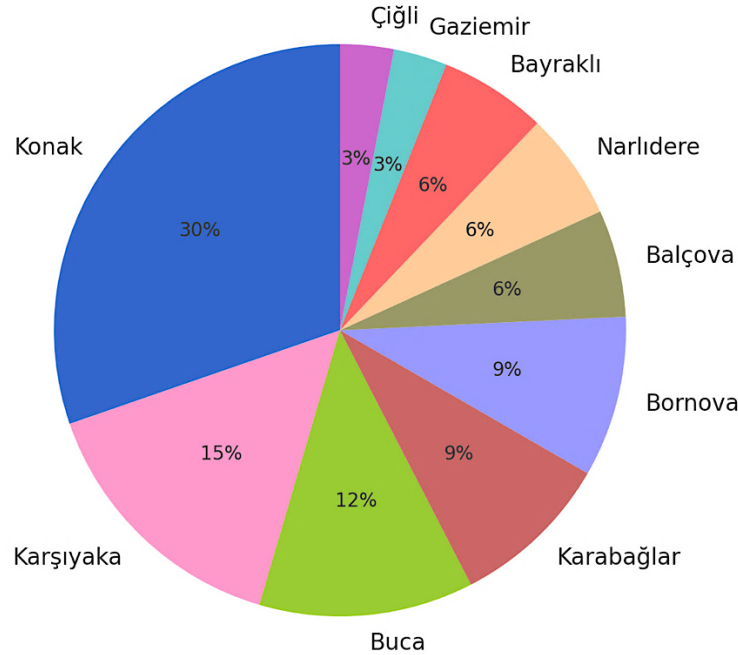


(Source: *Data from İKPG Kültür Haritası – 2017, İzmir Akdeniz Akademisi, (2022), visualization recreated by the author.*)

According to the data, 80% of the cultural spaces are concentrated in three central districts (Karşıyaka, Bornova, Konak), which account for 27% of the city's population. In contrast, the remaining three-quarters of the city hosts only 20% of the cultural spaces. In other words, there is a cultural “center”, and then there is the “center of the center” which is Konak.⁷³ Konak, with a 9% share of the population, hosts 59% of the cultural spaces. Therefore, at first glance, a cultural supply inequality is evident on İzmir's cultural map.

⁷³ Serhan Ada, “İzmir Kültür Haritası: Kültür–Sanat Mekânları – 2017”, *Pla+form İzmir Kültür Haritası: Kültür–Sanat Mekânları – 2017*, Aralık 2017, İzmir: İzmir Akdeniz Akademisi ve İzmir Büyükşehir Belediyesi, PDF, <https://www.izmeda.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Platform-izmir-kultur-haritasi.pdf>

Figure 2.9. Public Areas Hosting Cultural Events – District Breakdown



(Source: *Data from İKPG Kültür Haritası – 2017, İzmir Akdeniz Akademisi, (2022), visualization recreated by the author.*)

Regarding the distribution of public areas managed by the local government, used for arts and cultural events across İzmir's districts, Konak alone accounts for 30% of these spaces, followed by Karşıyaka (15%) and Buca (12%). Districts like Bayraklı and Gaziemir show significant underrepresentation, each having only 3% or less. This spatial concentration indicates a need for a more equitable distribution of public cultural venues throughout the city.

İKPG's Cultural Mapping initiative represents a significant civil effort grounded in a bottom-up approach to cultural policy-making. Emerging from the collective energy of independent cultural actors and coordinated by the Academy, this process exemplifies a participatory mode of knowledge production that values the lived experiences, informal networks, and territorial specificities of the city's cultural field. Instead of relying solely on top-down institutional inventories, the mapping prioritizes local perspectives and fosters a sense of

shared authorship among cultural stakeholders. This methodological orientation enhances both the visibility and legitimacy of grassroots cultural practices within urban cultural governance. However, despite its innovative framework, the mapping remains limited in its longitudinal scope and lacks integration with broader policy tools or strategic urban planning documents. Further development could involve more systematic data collection over time, the inclusion of underrepresented or transient cultural actors, and the establishment of feedback mechanisms between mappers and municipal authorities. Such steps would not only ensure the sustainability of the mapping process but also enhance its long-term impact on cultural planning in İzmir.⁷⁴

2.2.6. Agenda 21 for Culture: A Tool to Enhance the Role of Culture in Urban Policies

İzmir's engagement with Agenda 21 for Culture programs has been a progressive journey marked by significant milestones and impactful outcomes. İzmir is the first city in Türkiye to take part in these programs.

2.2.6.1. Pilot City İzmir (2015-2017)

The İMM became a member of the Pilot Cities Europe Program upon the Culture Committee of the Academy, following an official invitation from UCLG in 2015, marking a significant step in integrating cultural policies into the city's sustainable development framework. The Academy has taken on the role of the main coordinating body of the Pilot City İzmir Program. This engagement, which spanned from 2016 to 2019, involved a series of structured activities

⁷⁴ Ayşegül Sabuktay, *İzmir Mediterranean Academy as a Model of Governance of Culture* (İzmir: İzmir Mediterranean Academy, 2019), 3. https://www.agenda21culture.net/sites/default/files/izmir_eng.pdf

aimed at evaluating and enhancing İzmir's cultural landscape. Key activities and workshops summarized in the İzmir Pilot City Final Article⁷⁵ (September 2018) included:

- *Self-Assessment Workshop (March 2016):*

İzmir began its journey with a comprehensive self-assessment workshop that involved 34 participants from governmental, municipal, academic, and civil society institutions. This activity provided the data for the subsequent steps in the process to align the city's cultural policies with the principles outlined in the Culture 21 Actions framework.

The self-assessment highlighted that the connection between culture and education was weak and generally unsatisfactory. Due to Türkiye's centrally regulated education system, certain cultural education issues could not be addressed at the local level, emphasizing the urgent need for non-formal cultural education. Additionally, there were no substantial training programs related to cultural management, cultural policies, or cultural rights in the sector. Overall, cultural rights appeared to be in a developing stage, though not at a desired level. The evaluation indicated that the Culture and Economy section was also in a developing stage. Although there were some mentions of the role of culture in local economic development strategies, the mechanisms for assessing the contributions of cultural actors to the local economy were considered weak.

For the most part, equality and social inclusion were perceived to be in the early stages of development. The local social policies regarding health, employment, welfare, and inclusion included some references to culture as a relevant factor influencing their effectiveness, yet the actual implementation could be improved. Finally, cultural plans adopted and implemented at the metropolitan level, as well as practices encouraging citizen participation in decision-making processes regarding local cultural policies, have been identified as significant examples of the implementation of local cultural governance. Independent civil

⁷⁵ UCLG Committee on Culture, *Izmir: Final Report of the Pilot City Programme* (Barcelona: UCLG, 2021), https://www.agenda21culture.net/sites/default/files/files/cities/content/informe_izmir_final-gal_eng_1.pdf.

society platforms, such as the İzmir Design Platform, İKPG, and the Academy, have demonstrated that significant progress has already been made toward a participatory policy.

- *Development of the Work Program:*

After the initial workshop, a team representing various stakeholders involved in the self-assessment practice was established to evaluate the results and design necessary steps for a work plan. Based on insights from the self-assessment, a tailored work program was developed around four thematic areas: Culture and Education, Culture and Economy, Culture and Social Inclusion, and Culture and Information. This plan outlined specific actions to address the identified strengths and areas for improvement in the city's cultural policies.

The priorities were listed as follows:

- Encouraging cultural institutions, such as museums, theaters, and art centers, to create and facilitate informal cultural education activities
- Initiating a feasibility study on education in cultural management, cultural policies, and other aspects of sustainable development
- Establishing a “fund” or mechanism to provide financial support for independent cultural projects
- Enhancing the cultural engagement and participation of underprivileged groups and communities
- Promoting diversity and creativity as an essential part of local cultural policies
- Extending the information channels for cultural activities and actors in addition to improving the possibilities of international cooperation

The post-assessment action plan crafted by the İzmir Pilot City team illustrates a strategic effort to connect the city's cultural vision with localized priorities that align with Agenda 21 for Culture. The four thematic pillars—Culture and Education, Culture and Economy, Culture and Social Inclusion, and Culture and Information—reflect a multidimensional understanding of culture as a cross-cutting policy field.

Notably, the outlined priorities indicate a shift from static cultural provision towards participatory and developmental models of governance. For instance, the call for informal

cultural education facilitated by existing institutions signals a desire to democratize access to knowledge production beyond formal schooling. Similarly, the proposal to conduct a feasibility study on cultural management education suggests an institutional commitment to building local capacities in cultural governance—an area often underdeveloped in decentralized contexts.

During the development of the İzmir Work Program under the UCLG Pilot Cities framework, a peer-learning visit to Lisbon took place. The study visit showcased key practices in the areas of culture and social inclusion through on-site experiences such as the Todos Festival, the Marvila Library, refugee-focused facilities, and the GAU Urban Art Gallery. These examples offered concrete models of how culture can be integrated into inclusive urban transformation. Insights gained from Lisbon influenced İzmir's strategy for incorporating local cultural initiatives in marginalized areas, particularly in neighborhoods like Darağaç. The experience also aided in conceptualizing public space interventions, including the mural festival organized in the city center.⁷⁶

The recommendation to establish a financial support mechanism for independent cultural projects is particularly significant because it recognizes the precarity of non-institutional actors and the necessity for structural support systems beyond traditional grant schemes. This aligns with broader international discussions about cultural rights and the sustainability of independent ecosystems, especially in the Global South and Mediterranean contexts.

The inclusion of underprivileged communities and the emphasis on diversity and creativity further underscore the social dimension of cultural policy, resonating with the rights-based discourse promoted by UCLG. Finally, the focus on expanding communication and international cooperation channels reflects an awareness of the importance of visibility and network-building as enablers of cultural vitality.

⁷⁶ İzmir Mediterranean Academy, *İzmir: Pilot City Final Report* (Barcelona: UCLG Committee on Culture, 2019), 13, https://www.agenda21culture.net/sites/default/files/files/cities/content/informe_izmir_final-gal_eng_1.pdf.

Altogether, these priorities indicate a governance model that transcends cultural programming to focus on infrastructure development, capacity building, and equity-oriented access strategies. However, similar to many such programs, the challenge does not lie in pinpointing areas for improvement but in establishing mechanisms that guarantee continuity, transparency, and participation over the long term.

- *Pilot Measures Implementation*

Following the measures described in the Work Program, the project team agreed to accommodate four projects in concordance with the four thematic areas:

- Good Design İzmir (www.iyitasarimizmir.org), an annual design event launched in 2016 by the Academy, aims to position design as a key aspect of the city while enhancing the competitiveness of the design sector by connecting designers, producers, non-governmental organizations, and investors. The event is organized in partnership with design associations, universities, professional designers, scholars, district municipalities, and various departments of the İMM. Over the years, Good Design İzmir has garnered substantial support from the local design community, highlighting Kültürpark's (<https://www.kulturparkizmir.org/>) cultural significance by utilizing it as a contemporary cultural venue.

Good Design İzmir is preparing to celebrate its 10th anniversary in 2025. Each edition focuses on a specific theme. For instance, the ninth edition in November 2024 centered on the theme of “Dialogue” exploring how design can address social, ecological, and spatial challenges. The eighth edition in December 2023 was themed “Reconciliation”, emphasizing the transformative role of design in fostering dialogue and harmony. The Academy has issued an open call to define the theme for the 10th edition using a participatory approach, and the application submissions were finalized on February 21, 2025.

- The Basmane Urban Design Project⁷⁷ was conceived as a micro-scale extension of the İzmir History Project⁷⁸, initiated by the İzmir Metropolitan Municipality (İMM) in 2013. Centered around the Kemeraltı district—İzmir’s historical core—the project aimed to revitalize an area that had long been neglected due to deteriorating physical conditions and significant socio-demographic changes. Beyond addressing infrastructural shortcomings, the initiative sought to reinforce residents’ connection to history and collective memory through spatial and cultural interventions.

A research-based, participatory, and human-centered design approach was adopted. In the initial phase, a comprehensive study was conducted on the historical context of the area, particularly focusing on Basmane and Anafartalar Street. This was followed by systematic field observations, photographic documentation, and stakeholder interviews with local shopkeepers, visitors, and civil society organizations, aiming to gather both positive and negative perceptions of the site. Based on the findings, design criteria and guidelines were developed, taking into account local values, historical layers, current urban conditions, and relevant international examples. These criteria served as a continuous reference throughout the design process. The project utilized Human-Centered Design methods, including mind mapping and scenario planning, and held a participatory design workshop to explore conceptual alternatives. Final proposals were selected and further developed into detailed designs and three-dimensional visualizations. The process concluded with documentation and the production of a project booklet, ensuring that the outcomes could be communicated effectively to relevant stakeholders.

Overall, the project highlighted the neighborhood’s social and historical values, aiming to promote cultural interaction and create a lasting impact. A central goal was to transform the area into a multicultural hub that would attract both local and

⁷⁷ İzmir Akdeniz Akademisi, Basmane Project Report (İzmir: İzmir Akdeniz Akademisi, n.d.), https://www.izmeda.org/yayimlar/projeler/basmane_web_son.pdf.

⁷⁸ İzmir Büyükşehir Belediyesi, *İzmir Tarih Projesi Tanıtım Videosu*, Kentimiz İzmir, <https://kentimizizmir.org.tr/izmir-tarih-iletisim-projesi/>.

international visitors. To achieve this, the project focused on promoting cultural diversity and developing culture-oriented communication strategies. Additionally, a series of events and activities were designed to enhance social and cultural accessibility by activating symbolic concepts associated with the area's heritage—such as “encounter,” “intersection,” “meeting,” and “leaving a mark” (*karşılaşma, kesişme, buluşma, iz bırakma*)—thereby facilitating meaningful interactions among users of the space.

The Basmane Urban Design Guide proposed a layered communication strategy to visually support the spatial interventions envisioned for the area. It included the development of a flexible visual identity and a system of multilingual signage aimed at improving orientation and accessibility while reflecting the neighborhood's cultural diversity. Emphasis is placed on designing signalization tools and place markers that reinforce a sense of identity and belonging. The guide also recommended the installation of urban furniture and recreational elements designed in harmony with local patterns and material textures, as well as façade improvements that respect existing architectural characteristics. These interventions were conceived not only as aesthetic enhancements but also as communicative tools that strengthen the link between space, memory, and users.⁷⁹

Although the guide was formally completed and delivered to the relevant municipal departments, the implementation of its graphic and spatial design components has remained limited. While certain public presentations and temporary cultural activities were organized to raise awareness about the project and its values, the proposed visual identity system, signage elements, and architectural improvements have not been fully materialized in the physical environment to date. This partial realization may be attributed to shifts in administrative priorities, resource constraints, or the complexity of integrating such interventions into ongoing heritage preservation and infrastructure

⁷⁹ İzmir Akdeniz Akademisi, *Basmane Kentsel Tasarım Rehberi* (İzmir: İzmir Akdeniz Akademisi, 2019), 34–41, https://www.izmeda.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Basmane_web_son.pdf.

agendas. As such, the guide remains a valuable but largely unexecuted reference for future urban revitalization efforts in the Basmane district.

- Launched in 2017, “kültürLab”⁸⁰ was the first platform of its kind to bring together representatives from seventeen different entities, including municipal departments, cultural and educational institutions, and civil society organizations. It aimed at creating an educational platform among İzmir’s cultural institutions (public, private, and independent art and culture organizations), fostering stronger inter-institutional communication, promote a culture-oriented approach to education, and strengthen the capacity of stakeholders through collaborative project development and knowledge exchange.

Key priorities included:

- Incorporate cultural education into both formal education systems and lifelong learning programs, ensuring accessibility for individuals across all age and social groups.
- Raise awareness about the city's culture, history, and heritage among communities.
- Introduce young individuals, the future cultural and artistic producers, to the creative industries, encouraging innovation and creativity.
- Ensure the recognition and respect of cultural rights of all communities, encouraging intercultural interaction and celebrating diversity.
- Adopt a holistic approach to local history and heritage.

According to the İzmir Pilot City Final Report (March 2019)⁸¹, the platform represented a case of cultural governance – the first of its kind – where central and local public actors

⁸⁰ “kültürLab İzmir”, İzmir Akdeniz Akademisi website, <https://www.izmeda.org/?projeler=kulturlab-izmir>.

⁸¹ United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), *İzmir: Pilot City Final Report, Agenda 21 for Culture* (2019), https://www.agenda21culture.net/sites/default/files/files/cities/content/informe_izmir_final-eng_0.pdf.

convened in periodic meetings with representatives from civil society and the art community, collaborating toward a shared objective.

Despite the availability of detailed project presentations and documentation—especially in reports from the Academy and UCLG—there seems to be a lack of structured follow-up mechanisms to assess the outcomes of the implemented initiatives. Notably, no comprehensive user surveys, impact assessments, or performance indicators have been published to evaluate the effectiveness, relevance, or sustainability of the proposed actions. The absence of collected feedback hinders the ability to critically reflect on the actual reach and transformative potential of the projects, presenting a significant gap in accountability, learning, and iterative policy development.

- *İzmir Culture Map: Culture and Art Venues - 2017*

(as previously discussed in Section 2.2.4.)

- *Peer-Learning Visits*

In May 2018, İzmir hosted a peer-learning visit with representatives from cities like Buenos Aires, Elefsina, Lisbon, Tenerife, and Terrassa. This event promoted the exchange of best practices and collaborative learning among the participating cities.

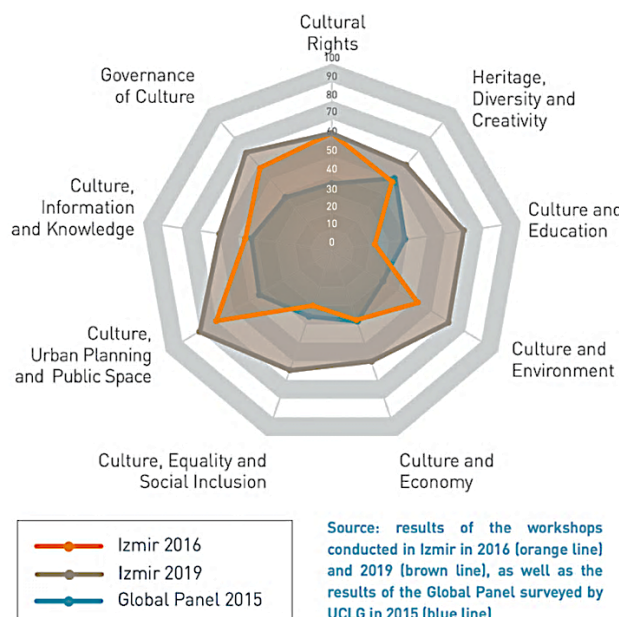
The peer-learning visit to İzmir focused on several thematic areas, creating a comprehensive framework for dialogue and exchange. Discussions surrounding local cultural policy and governance highlighted the organizational landscape of İzmir's cultural institutions, including İMM, the Academy, and the İKPG. Participants explored how these actors worked together to develop participatory and inclusive cultural strategies. The relationship between culture, heritage, and urban planning emerged as another central theme, illustrated through site visits to initiatives like the İzmir History Design Atelier, which aims to integrate cultural heritage into urban transformation processes. Furthermore, a seminar on cultural networking underscored the importance of inter-city collaboration and the use of shared platforms and tools to enhance local capacities. Lastly, the role of culture in promoting social inclusion was examined through the experiences of local organizations engaged in LGBTI+ rights, refugee

support, and minority representation. Collectively, these exchanges offered valuable insights into how cities can incorporate culture into broader sustainability agendas while strengthening institutional capacities and fostering translocal solidarity.

▪ *Final Conference (February 2019)*

Concluding the Pilot City Program, İzmir organized a closing conference⁸² to assess progress, share outcomes, and discuss future steps for integrating culture into sustainable urban development. During the conference, another self-assessment exercise was conducted to evaluate the city's performance throughout the Pilot Cities program, comparing it with the initial self-assessment exercise conducted during the launch phase.

Figure 2.10. İzmir Post Pilot Self-Assessment: Radar 2019



(Source: *United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG). İzmir: Pilot City Final Report, Agenda 21 for Culture, 2019.*)

⁸² For more detailed information about the outcomes of the İzmir Pilot City Final Conference, see the final report: United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), *İzmir: Pilot City Final Report, Agenda 21 for Culture* (2019), https://www.agenda21culture.net/sites/default/files/files/cities/content/informe_izmir_final-eng_0.pdf.

The outcome of these exercises, called “Radar” above, shows that İzmir has demonstrated clear progress across all overall criteria. Notably, the most significant improvements were observed in two areas that were below the global average in 2016: Culture and Education (enhanced through the kültürLab initiative) and Culture, Equality, and Social Inclusion (strengthened by civil society efforts, particularly İKPG). In all other criteria, the city has maintained or exceeded its previous performance.

Through these concerted efforts, İzmir established a more structured and strategic approach to cultural governance. The city effectively integrated cultural considerations into broader urban development plans, fostering an inclusive environment where various stakeholders could engage in cultural policymaking. The initiatives undertaken during this period built a strong foundation for ongoing cultural development, positioning İzmir as a leading city in the UCLG network dedicated to leveraging culture for sustainable growth.

2.2.6.2. Leading City İzmir (2020-2023)

After successfully completing the Pilot Cities Europe Program, İzmir was invited in 2020 to join the Leading Cities program, coordinated by the UCLG Committee on Culture (UCLG, 2021).

The program began with a series of preparatory activities, including cultural mapping, thematic working groups, and collective learning sessions. These activities allowed for a comprehensive self-assessment of the city’s cultural policies and their alignment with the SDGs (UCLG, 2021). A key output of this phase was the development of the “7 Keys” framework—an internal diagnostic tool designed to evaluate the cultural strengths, gaps, and priorities of the city across multiple domains. This process enabled İzmir to reflect critically on its own practices while setting clear strategic directions for future cultural policy development. One of the key contributions of this phase was facilitating multistakeholder dialogue through webinars and workshops, which brought together municipal officials, civil

society representatives, and academics to discuss the intersections of culture, participation, education, and sustainability.

Compared to its earlier phase as a Pilot City (2016–2019), the Leading Cities process expanded İzmir’s focus from policy experimentation to project implementation, particularly emphasizing themes such as ecological sustainability, cultural participation in rural areas, and the integration of culture into education (UCLG, 2021).

This shift materialized through a set of strategic and locally embedded projects:

- “Cultural Pioneers of İzmir” aimed to support the cultural expression of youth and ethnically diverse families, encouraging their engagement with contemporary art practices.
- “Neighborhood Initiative” focused on place-making and neighborhood-level engagement, reinforcing collective identity through grassroots cultural events.
- “Stations for Culture” targeted peripheral districts to stimulate cultural production and reveal local creative potential, responding to previously underserved areas.
- “NatureCulture Celebrations” fostered intercultural dialogue to enhance mutual understanding and solidarity among various cultural communities. This was achieved through open-air events and celebrations that emphasized environmental awareness, showcasing İzmir’s increasing dedication to ecological issues.
- “Leading Village” addressed rural-urban disparities in access to culture by piloting participatory projects in Karaburun and Kiraz, connecting local knowledge with cultural creativity.
- “Our Class: İzmir” integrated natural and cultural heritage into educational programs, enabling teachers and students to extend the learning process beyond the classroom through extra-curricular activities rooted in place-based experiences.
- “Balconnection” established artistic interventions in public spaces, enabling direct interaction between artists and communities and strengthening the presence of culture in everyday life. Balconnection was invited to the 7 Keys of İzmir due to its project goals, which directly address some of the crucial issues discussed.

These projects collectively indicate a significant shift toward more distributed, participatory, and sustainable models of cultural governance. They also align closely with the SDGs, particularly in promoting inclusive societies, reducing inequalities, and fostering environmental stewardship (UCLG, 2021).

The culmination of İzmir's participation in the Leading Cities program was its hosting of the 4th UCLG Culture Summit in 2021, which brought together cultural actors, local authorities, and international organizations (UCLG, 2021, September 9). This summit produced the İzmir Declaration⁸³, a global call to recognize culture as the fourth pillar of sustainable development and to reinforce its place in urban policy.

Through this process, İzmir not only strengthened its internal cultural governance frameworks but also made a significant contribution to the international cultural policy discourse, setting an example for other cities seeking to integrate culture more structurally into their urban development strategies (UCLG, 2021).

2.2.6.3. The 4th UCLG Culture Summit in İzmir (2021)

Since 2015, UCLG has organized Culture Summits to highlight the crucial role of culture in sustainable urban development. Previous editions have taken place in Bilbao, Spain (2015), Jeju, South Korea (2017), and Buenos Aires, Argentina (2019). The Culture Summits have served as a pivotal gathering for cities, local governments, and stakeholders committed to integrating culture into sustainable development frameworks. They emphasize the significance of cultural policies in achieving sustainable development goals and facilitate the exchange of experiences, models, and policies among cities and territories worldwide.

The 4th UCLG Culture Summit, built on the results of the previous three editions, took place in İzmir, Kültürpark from September 9th to 11th, 2021. Key themes included:

⁸³ United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), *The İzmir Declaration: Culture Shapes the Future of Humanity*(Committee on Culture of UCLG, 2021), https://agenda21culture.net/sites/default/files/izmir2021_statement_en.pdf.

- Local Governments and Cultural Heritage: Examining the role of local authorities in preserving and promoting cultural heritage.
- Cultural Diversity in the Creative Economy: Exploring how cultural diversity can foster economic innovation and inclusivity.
- Cultural Diplomacy: Exploring the role of cities and local governments in international cultural cooperation.
- Culture and Sustainable Tourism: Examining the intersection of cultural heritage and tourism to promote sustainable local economies.

Unlike previous summits that mainly focused on cultural rights, creative economies, and participatory governance, İzmir's summit was significantly influenced by the COVID-19 crisis. Discussions centered on how culture could aid societies in healing and rebuilding in the aftermath of the pandemic, highlighting social cohesion, mental well-being, and economic recovery through culture.

A significant outcome of the summit was the adoption of the “İzmir Declaration: Culture Shapes the Future of Humanity.”⁸⁴ This declaration reaffirmed the commitment of cities and local governments to prioritize culture in sustainable development strategies, acknowledging its vital role in fostering inclusive, resilient, and peaceful societies, particularly in the context of post-pandemic recovery.

The COVID-19 crisis has made evident the profound need for culture within cities and communities. People have turned to culture to strengthen their sense of belonging, inventing new forms of participation, recognizing what brings them together, and creating meaning and solidarity. The pandemic has also demonstrated that cultural actors need better working conditions, which were already precarious and challenging in the old normal.⁸⁵ While

⁸⁴ United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), *The İzmir Declaration: Culture Shapes the Future of Humanity* (Committee on Culture of UCLG, 2021), https://agenda21culture.net/sites/default/files/izmir2021_statement_en.pdf

⁸⁵ United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), *Culture: Shaping the Future: The Final Report* (UCLG Culture Summit, İzmir, 2021), p:8, https://agenda21culture.net/sites/default/files/uclgculturesummit_%C4%B0zmir_finalreport_en.pdf

previous summits contributed to UCLG's Agenda 21 for Culture, this was the first time a dedicated declaration explicitly linked culture with future resilience and planetary well-being.

The İzmir Declaration introduces the concept of “circular culture”⁸⁶ built upon four interrelated forms of harmony: with nature, the past, one another, and change. This multidimensional notion of harmony underscores the need to rethink the role of culture in shaping sustainable and inclusive futures. Harmony with nature calls for an urgent departure from extractivist and adversarial attitudes, recognizing nature not merely as a resource but as a coexistent system from which to learn. Harmony with the past emphasizes the importance of historical and cultural continuity, asserting that future cultural policies must be informed by a meaningful understanding of previous cultural experiences. Harmony with one another is framed as a democratic imperative, advocating for inclusivity, equal citizenship, and shared responsibility in protecting both human and non-human rights. Finally, harmony with change acknowledges the dynamic nature of culture and the need to embrace transformation, guided by the creativity of younger generations and inspired by natural systems. Together, these principles propose a holistic cultural paradigm essential for addressing contemporary global challenges.

The İzmir Declaration builds upon the foundational principles of the 2020 Rome Charter, which introduced five core cultural rights—Discover, Create, Share, Enjoy, and Protect—within a framework of participatory governance, sustainability, and equality. Advancing this agenda, the İzmir Declaration operationalizes these rights through the concept of circular culture, structured around four dimensions of harmony: with nature, the past, each other, and change. This approach translates abstract cultural rights into tangible local actions, such as inclusive cultural mapping, open-air public programming, and heritage-based urban interventions. In doing so, İzmir not only affirms the normative vision of the Rome Charter

⁸⁶ United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), *The İzmir Declaration: Culture Shapes the Future of Humanity* (Committee on Culture of UCLG, 2021), https://agenda21culture.net/sites/default/files/izmir2021_statement_en.pdf

but also demonstrates its practical application in city planning and community engagement, offering a replicable model for rights-based local cultural governance.

İzmir's summit had also a strong ecological focus, aligning with the city's identity as a “nature-friendly city”. It initiated discussions on how cultural policies can enhance climate resilience, conserve biodiversity, and promote sustainable urbanism – a theme that was less explored in earlier summits.

Unlike previous editions, the İzmir summit was the first to be conducted in a hybrid format due to pandemic-related constraints, enabling both in-person and virtual participation. This facilitated broader engagement from cultural practitioners, policymakers, and civil society organizations worldwide, making the discussions more inclusive and globally diverse

The conference featured significant discussions on the role of civil society in shaping culture. Civic engagement and participatory governance were key themes, aligning with broader efforts to foster a more inclusive, democratic, and community-driven cultural landscape.

The summit highlighted the need for multi-level governance in cultural policy, emphasizing that local governments should not act alone but rather collaborate with civil society organizations (CSOs), cultural networks, and grassroots movements.

Sessions focused on co-governance models, where CSOs and local authorities co-create policies rather than just being consulted.

Civil society actors, particularly those advocating for marginalized groups, artists, and community-led initiatives, were acknowledged as essential stakeholders in safeguarding cultural rights. Discussions revolved around how local governments can facilitate better access to culture by supporting independent cultural spaces, community-led festivals, and alternative art practices. Many contributors stressed that culture should not be top-down but instead developed collaboratively with communities from the bottom up.

Thus, the Declaration calls for stronger collaboration between local governments and civil society in the design and implementation of cultural policies. Discussions emphasized that

involving civil society not only democratizes cultural governance but also enhances accountability. This approach permits a more transparent and participatory process in the formulation and execution of cultural policies.

2.2.7. The Rise of Independent Civil Initiatives in the Field of Culture and Arts

Beginning in the early 2010s, İzmir witnessed a notable increase in the number and visibility of independent civil initiatives in the cultural and artistic sphere. Emerging largely outside of formal institutional structures, these initiatives have played a significant role in diversifying cultural expressions, expanding participation, and reshaping the relationship between civil society and cultural governance in the city.⁸⁷ Many of these actors have not only created new platforms for artistic production and public engagement but have also contributed to the formation of alternative networks, working methods, and discourses in the cultural field.⁸⁸

This growing ecosystem of independent initiatives has often aligned itself with values such as horizontal collaboration, inclusivity, locality, and experimentation—principles that reflect broader shifts in how culture is imagined, produced, and shared in urban contexts. Their emergence can also be seen as a response to structural gaps in the institutional cultural infrastructure, as well as a reflection of the creative energy and civic consciousness present in İzmir.

While many of these initiatives remain relatively small in scale and often operate precariously, their collective impact on the city’s cultural landscape is increasingly acknowledged by both public institutions and academic observers. Their presence points to a more pluralistic and participatory model of cultural development, one that is not solely

⁸⁷ Zeynep Gülrü Göker, “Participatory Cultural Governance in Türkiye: Challenges and Potentials,” in *Cultural Policy Yearbook*, ed. (Istanbul: BILGI Publishing, 2021).

⁸⁸ Such formations often emphasize informality, horizontality, and experimentalism as strategic responses to institutional absence or inertia.

driven by top-down policies but also shaped by grassroots practices and community-based approaches.

Chapter Three will offer a closer examination of selected initiatives, focusing on how they navigate everyday challenges, respond to ongoing precarity, and develop strategies for sustaining cultural engagement within İzmir's evolving independent cultural scene.

2.2.8. The Role of European Funding in the Expansion of Independent Cultural Initiatives

Over the past decade, independent cultural actors in İzmir have seen their visibility and organizational capacity strengthened by participation in international funding programs. Initiatives such as TANDEM Türkiye (tandemforculture.org), Spaces of Culture (spacesofculture.com), CultureCIVIC (culture-civic.org), Sivil Düşün (sivildusun.net), and Ortaklaşa (ortaklasa.iksv.org) have played a crucial role—particularly since 2016—in providing the financial resources necessary for artists, curators, collectives, and rights-based cultural organizations to realize their cultural and artistic projects.

Beyond direct grants, these programs have provided essential assistance mechanisms, including capacity-building, consultancy, and mentorship opportunities such as training in project design, implementation, reporting, and international collaboration. Additionally, the rigorous monitoring and evaluation frameworks required by international funders have introduced a more systematic approach to impact assessment among independent actors. This has enhanced their capacity to document outcomes, plan for long-term sustainability, and articulate clear exit or scale-up strategies once grant periods conclude.

For many grassroots initiatives, this support has not only enabled the realization of cultural projects that would otherwise be unfeasible but also enhanced their visibility and legitimacy within local and transnational networks. In a national climate where structural support for independent cultural production remains limited and often unstable, European funding has effectively served as a compensatory mechanism.

Yet, despite the growing availability of these international resources, smaller and more informal actors face significant barriers to accessing them. Complex application procedures and demanding administrative requirements mean that a disproportionate share of funds goes to larger, more established organizations. This imbalance highlights the urgent need for targeted capacity-building programs to equip grassroots actors with the skills necessary to navigate transnational grant frameworks.

Moreover, EU funding frameworks embed specific thematic priorities directly into their calls. Applicants often adjust their project designs to align with these externally imposed themes to qualify for support. This top-down agenda-setting can impose external priorities over local needs, risking a dilution of grassroots values and community-based objectives.

However, while these international programs have been instrumental in supporting the independent cultural field, an overreliance on grant-based funding should not hinder the development of autonomous, locally rooted resource-generation strategies. It is essential to avoid a dependency dynamic that may unintentionally discourage long-term financial sustainability or reduce the incentive to cultivate alternative funding models and local partnerships.

2.2.9. İzmir Culture Fund (İzKF): A Local Public Support Model for Independent Cultural Production

In the broader context of Türkiye's cultural policy landscape, financial support mechanisms for independent cultural actors at the local level have historically remained limited, fragmented, and often informal. While several municipalities do allocate resources to cultural activities, these supports are frequently shaped by short-term considerations or *ad hoc* decision-making, rather than long-term strategic planning frameworks. Moreover, the absence of standardized criteria and independent evaluation structures has, in many cases, hindered the development of transparent, equitable, and accountable public funding models for the cultural sector.

It is against this backdrop that the İMM launched the İzKF, aiming to introduce a more structured and participatory approach to municipal cultural funding. Designed to respond to the evolving needs of İzmir's independent cultural field, İzKF distinguishes itself through its open call system, publicly shared evaluation criteria, and the involvement of a multidisciplinary, independent panel.

Launched in November 2023, the İzKF represents a pioneering public funding mechanism specifically designed to support independent cultural production. As one of the first of its kind among local governments in Türkiye, İzKF stands out not only for its direct investment in grassroots cultural activity but also for setting a potential model for participatory and transparent cultural governance at the municipal level.

The fund operates via open calls inviting applications from individuals, collectives, and non-profit cultural organizations based in İzmir. Submissions are evaluated based on a clear set of publicly accessible criteria.⁸⁹ These include the project's artistic and conceptual originality, the feasibility of its implementation and budget, and its potential impact on the cultural ecosystem. However, beyond these core standards, the evaluation process also considers a range of qualitative dimensions that reflect İzKF's broader cultural vision.

Particular attention is given to how projects engage with the cultural, historical, or social fabric of İzmir—whether by being site-specific, drawing on local narratives, or forging meaningful community relationships. Interdisciplinary approaches within the arts are also encouraged, especially those that blend multiple artistic disciplines—such as visual arts, performance, sound, and text—into a unified, innovative form of expression. Equally prioritized are initiatives that incorporate local capacity-building components—such as workshops, seminars, and other educational activities—to strengthen skills and knowledge within the community. Projects that emphasize collaboration at any scale—among individual

⁸⁹ Application guidelines, evaluation principles, and project results are publicly accessible via the İzmirArt platform and the official website of the İzmir Metropolitan Municipality available at: İzmir Metropolitan Municipality, *İzmirArt Platformu Başvuru Kılavuzu, Değerlendirme İlkeleri ve Proje Sonuçları*, <https://www.izmir.art/tr/preview/65572cce158af359e5a9277f>.

artists, between institutions, or across different segments of the cultural field—are evaluated favorably, as are those with participatory, inclusive frameworks aimed at broadening access and fostering dialogue across diverse audiences.

Rather than favoring large-scale or institutionalized actors, the fund explicitly seeks to support small, emerging, or informal cultural initiatives, providing both financial assistance and symbolic recognition.

The fund further distinguishes itself by utilizing an independent evaluation panel comprising professionals, academics, and experts from diverse disciplines within the cultural sector. This structure ensures impartiality in the selection process and aligns with international standards for cultural grant-making. Additionally, it enhances institutional trust in İMM and legitimacy within the cultural community.

To exemplify, below is an outline of some projects selected for support in the first edition of İzKF:

- “Yer Altından Gökyüzüne: İzmir’in Sesleri” (*From Underground to the Sky: Sounds of İzmir*)⁹⁰, run by Mandala Studio ([instagram.com/mandalakaraburun](https://www.instagram.com/mandalakaraburun)). Karaburun this project conducted a citywide soundwalk and field recording campaign across İzmir’s diverse neighborhoods, from underground cisterns to seaside promenades. Participants—both local residents and emerging sound artists—took part in workshops on location recording, editing, and archiving, which built community capacity in audio documentation techniques. The collected material was then curated into an album released on 29 September 2024, featuring tracks like “Yeraltından Gökyüzüne İmece Girizgah” and “Basmane Sabah 4:00,” which blend found sounds, live performance, and local oral histories. A concluding public listening session and mini-concert at Mandala Studio further underscored the project’s commitment to site-specific engagement, interdisciplinary collaboration, and inclusive cultural access.

⁹⁰ “Mandalakaraburun,” video, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bwhK3aE2ABw>.

- “Suyun Taşıdıkları: Selinos ve Kentsel Belleğin İzleri” (*What the Water Brought: Traces of Selinos and Urban Memory*)⁹¹ is an interdisciplinary cultural memory project that aims to make visible the layers of urban and local memory shaped around the Selinos Stream in the Bergama district of İzmir. Supported by İzKF, the project was jointly carried out by Karantina Collective (karantinamekan.com) and Sarı Denizaltı Art Initiative (saridenizalti.com). The project's outputs included a documentary film and an exhibition, both of which highlighted the cultural and historical significance of the stream within the evolving urban fabric.
- “Kiosk – Performatif Showcase” is a site-specific project conceived and led by artist Eren Arıkan in the town of Bergama. The intervention repurposes disused public kiosks as mobile micro-stages, hosting short performance works, pop-up workshops, and community gatherings directly within neighborhood contexts. By activating these overlooked urban fixtures, the project fosters unexpected encounters between artists and residents, exemplifying İzKF’s focus on locality, interdisciplinary practice, and collaborative engagement.

As a pioneering municipal approach in local cultural policy in Türkiye, İzKF demonstrates how local governments can actively foster an inclusive and vibrant cultural ecosystem. Its framework and implementation can serve as a model for other cities looking to develop context-specific, participatory cultural policies based on local needs and priorities. However, no new calls for proposals have been announced since the initial funding round, raising concerns about the continuity and institutionalization of the program.

As elaborated throughout Chapter Two, over the past fifteen years, İzmir has witnessed the gradual emergence of a more pluralistic and participatory model of cultural governance. This process has been shaped by a variety of municipal, civic, and transnational initiatives that

⁹¹ “Mandalakaraburun Short Documentary”, video available at: YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gKP0CJe8rd8>, Sarı Denizaltı, *Mandalakaraburun Projesi Tanıtım Dosyası*, https://www.saridenizalti.com/files/ugd/d15c2a_2e55fd475a5149f08821c1fad621ce3.pdf; A short video is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gKP0CJe8rd8>.

collectively redefined the relationship between culture, urban policy, and civil society. From the initial İzmir Culture Workshop in 2009 to the institutionalization of cultural platforms and the hosting of international cultural summits, the city has shown a growing capacity to position culture as a strategic element of urban development. Notably, the rise of independent civil initiatives and the diversification of funding mechanisms—both international and local—have expanded the room for citizen-led cultural production.

Building upon this evolving framework, Chapter Three offers a closer examination of the independent cultural initiatives that have emerged within—and helped shape—this ecosystem. Through selected case studies, it explores the everyday practices, vulnerabilities, and collaborative strategies of these actors as they navigate uncertainty, seek sustainability, and strive to remain active agents of cultural governance in İzmir.

A CLOSER LOOK AT THE INDEPENDENT CULTURAL INITIATIVES IN İZMİR: EMERGING PRACTICES, DYNAMICS AND CHALLENGES

This final chapter focuses on a number of independent culture and art initiatives that emerged in İzmir throughout the 2010s and beyond, many of which were supported—directly or indirectly—by the groundwork laid by the İzmir Culture Workshop (2009) and upon the pioneering efforts and experiences initiated by İKPG. It traces the development of these initiatives within the broader urban and cultural dynamics of the city, paying special attention to those that have become prominent platforms for alternative cultural production, critical engagement, and community-based practices.

The chapter also examines how some of these initiatives were severely affected—especially in the post-pandemic period—by structural issues such as financial instability, lack of institutional support, and challenges related to long-term sustainability. While several have ceased operations, many others continue to adapt through a kind of “survivalist reflex” marked by constant experimentation, resource sharing, and informal collaboration. The discussion explores not only the common difficulties faced by these actors but also the inventive strategies, mutual support networks, and alternative models they have developed in response.

The chapter concludes with a set of observations and proposals based on these findings, aiming to contribute to broader debates on cultural policy, urban governance, and the role of independent initiatives in shaping more democratic and resilient cultural ecosystems.

Given the richness and diversity of İzmir's independent cultural scene, providing an exhaustive account of all initiatives within this chapter is not feasible. Instead, a selection of representative examples has been included—chosen for their relevance to the themes and discussions explored in this thesis, as well as for the insights they offer into the broader dynamics of cultural production, collaboration, and sustainability in the city.

3.1. Selected Independent Initiatives: Everyday Realities and Collaborative Tactics

3.1.1. NomadMind (2013)

Among its various research-based and participatory projects, NomadMind (nomadmind.org—founded by the duo Çiçek Tezer, architect and cultural manager and Emre Yıldız, graphic designer) initiated the “Misafir Odası” (*Guest Room*)⁹² audio conversation series in 2020 as a response to the social isolation brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. Conducted during a period of nationwide lockdowns, the series featured informal voice recordings in which artists, cultural workers, and collaborators reflected on altered daily rhythms, emerging routines, and the emotional contours of confinement. By turning inward toward the everyday, Misafir Odası documented a moment of global uncertainty through personal narratives and conversational intimacy.

Rather than functioning as a typical podcast or public talk, the project foregrounded the act of collective remembering and relational presence despite physical distance. In doing so, it aligned with NomadMind’s broader ethos of slow archiving, neighborhood-scale reflection, and ephemeral cultural gestures rooted in lived experience. The series offered a micro-level auditory mapping of pandemic time, highlighting how informal dialogue and shared vulnerability could themselves constitute a form of cultural production.

⁹² NomadMind, *Misafir Odası* (audio series, 2020), <https://www.nomadmind.org>.

3.1.2. KABO (2014)

Kendine Ait Bir Oda - KABO 92 (*A Room for Oneself*) is a nonprofit, open-format art initiative launched in 2014 to share a personal studio space for public cultural engagement. Initially founded by artist Esra Okyay in her studio in İzmir, the initiative gradually evolved into a nomadic platform that hosts exhibitions, screenings, and discussion events in various neighborhoods and venues throughout the city. KABO's core aim is to foster dialogue and collaboration between early-career and experienced artists while expanding spaces for artistic production and critical reflection outside institutional settings.

Functioning as a gathering place for art students, recent graduates, academics, and independent cultural actors, KABO facilitates project-based collaborations and peer learning exchanges. It creates opportunities for mutual support and co-creation through flexible, accessible formats. In this way, KABO has contributed to the informal infrastructure of İzmir's independent art scene by offering an adaptable, artist-led platform founded on continuity, hospitality, and openness. In the summer of 2018, NomadMind and KABO joined forces to organize a collaborative event. According to Emre Yıldız from NomadMind, what initially began as a search for a thematic focus gradually evolved into a deeper realization: that the very act of coming together, sharing space, and building connections across the independent cultural field was, in itself, a meaningful purpose. Motivated by this shared desire to foster dialogue and solidarity among like-minded cultural actors in the city, they launched a forum titled "Bir-Arada Alan Açmak" (*Offering Space To-gether*), where they discussed topics such as the economic and social challenges faced by cultural producers, the process of securing funding, access to spaces, and sustainability. This event also served as the starting point for the "Mekân Deneyimleri" (*Spatial Experiences*) series.

Following the forum, the Mekân Deneyimleri series explored how the rapidly expanding and evolving cultural activities in İzmir impacted the creative landscape and its participants. It addressed the challenges faced by cultural producers in these changing circumstances and

explored how collaborative strategies could be developed to support independent initiatives and promote cooperation in the creative process.

The series consisted of gatherings at various independent art and culture spaces in İzmir and aimed to facilitate the sharing of experiences. Each stop in the series highlights the conditions of cultural production and the specific challenges faced by different initiatives. Despite their diversity, many of these spaces shared concerns and everyday struggles.

Key recurring issues included financial sustainability, access to funding, the effects of competition over limited resources, and how solidarity could be fostered in a context where such competition might easily become divisive. For instance, at the Nazım Hikmet Culture Center, discussions focused on economic precarity and strategies to cope with the crisis. Shelter Artists Run Space (artistrunalliance.org) highlighted the dilemmas of being both physically and symbolically distant from the city center, as well as the challenges of accessing funding. At Hayy Open Space (see below p.87), the conversation shifted toward finding collective funding strategies and creating support mechanisms among those who receive and do not receive funds.

In all these examples, a common desire to foster stronger networks of solidarity and cooperation raises questions that must be addressed for the future of independent initiatives, such as:

- How can communication and collaboration be strengthened in face of shared economic and social challenges?
- Does the competition for funding undermine or strengthen solidarity among cultural actors?
- Can joint funding applications enable more initiatives to collectively benefit?
- How can those who receive funds can assist those who don't?
- How can we organize and improve the sustainability of current solidarity practices?

In summary, the Mekân Deneyimleri series reveals both the fragmentation and the potential for collective resilience within İzmir’s independent cultural field. Through shared questions and open conversations, it points toward the possibility of imagining more sustainable and inclusive cultural practices.

3.1.3. Darağaç (2014)

Founded in 2014 and still active today, Darağaç (daragac.com) is a non-profit, self-organized art initiative based in the Umurbey neighborhood of İzmir—an area historically marked by industrial use and almost derelict working-class housing. Instead of functioning as a conventional venue, Darağaç has evolved into a site-specific artistic ecosystem, hosting annual exhibitions and public installations throughout the neighborhood’s streets, building facades, and courtyards. The initiative primarily aims to create opportunities for early-career artists to showcase their work in non-commercial, non-institutional settings, with no restrictions on format, medium, or theme.

Over the years, Darağaç has received support from various independent funding programs, including SAHA’s Sustainability Fund, Spaces of Culture, and CultureCIVIC. This funding has enabled it to enhance its infrastructure and develop artist residencies, community gardens, and collaborative interventions. The Darağaç “Fermentation” project, supported by the Ortaklaşa Program⁹³, transformed an abandoned municipal building into a public kitchen and social space. These efforts reflect the initiative’s strong emphasis on place-making and locality.

Darağaç’s ongoing presence has also had a noticeable transformative impact on the neighborhood. What was once an overlooked and disinvested urban pocket has become an informal meeting point for artists, residents, and cultural visitors. The project challenges

⁹³ Ortaklaşa Program, launched by Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts (İKSV) in 2022 with support from the European Union, aims to foster collaborations between civil society and cultural actors to promote rights-based cultural policies. See: İstanbul Kültür Sanat Vakfı, *Ortaklaşa Programı*, <https://ortaklasa.iksv.org>.

conventional art world hierarchies by embedding artistic practices in everyday public life and prioritizing accessibility, experimentation, and locality. Its horizontal, inclusive, and materially adaptive approach sets it apart from other cultural actors in İzmir. Darağaç demonstrates how a neighborhood itself can evolve into a cultural platform—one shaped not by infrastructure or funding, but by continuity, trust, and mutual cohabitation between artists and community members.

3.1.4. TEOS Kültür Sanat Derneği (2016)

TEOS Kültür Sanat Derneği (*TEOS Culture and Arts Association* - teoskultursanat.com), established in 2016 in Seferihisar, İzmir, stands out among independent cultural initiatives in the region due to its well-structured organizational model and sustained institutional partnerships. The association brings together artists, researchers, and civil society professionals to foster interdisciplinary collaborations that emphasize ecological sustainability, cultural heritage, and participatory democracy.

One of its notable projects, KONSERVE (*Inter-City Guest Artist and Exchange Programme Network*), supported by the CultureCIVIC Inter-City Networking Grant, facilitated artist residencies and cultural exchanges across İzmir, Bursa, and Çanakkale, aiming to decentralize cultural production and strengthen interregional networks.⁹⁴ In 2023, TEOS also received funding under the Ortaklaşa: Culture, Dialogue and Support Programme, coordinated by the İstanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts (İKSİV) with support from the European Union. In partnership with Nilüfer Municipality (Bursa) and Selçuk Municipality (İzmir), the project promoted interdisciplinary art productions related to rural cultural heritage and fostered engagement between local communities and contemporary art

⁹⁴ CultureCIVIC, “Inter-City Networking Supported Projects,” accessed April 19, 2025, <https://www.culture-civic.org/en/news/inter-city-networking-supported-projects-through-inter-city-networking-grants-first-open-call-announced>.

practices.⁹⁵ Additionally, TEOS has been involved in various other projects such as the Visibility in Arts Festival, which highlights underrepresented artistic expressions and encourages inclusive cultural dialogues.⁹⁶

3.1.5. Hayy Open Space (2018)

Founded in 2018 in the historic Piyaleoğlu Han in İzmir's Kemeraltı district, Hayy Open Space (hayyacikalan.com) is an independent, non-profit art initiative that creates room for contemporary art practices across various disciplines. The space facilitates exhibitions, performances, reading sessions, listening events, and public discussions, with a strong emphasis on experimentation, collective thinking, and process-oriented artistic production. Instead of focusing on consumption, Hayy aims to nurture moments of attentive listening, shared experience, and critical reflection.

In 2019, Hayy Open Space co-organized the program “Sanatçılar İçin Hayatta Kalma Rehberi” (*A Survival Guide for Artists*) in collaboration with the Yıldız Çintay Art Collective (İzmir), the Kaarnamaa digital culture platform (Tehran), and the Va Space artist residency (Isfahan) as part of the Tandem Türkiye (tandemforculture.org) initiative. This transnational series of workshops and seminars aimed to address the structural needs of artist-run spaces and independent cultural actors in İzmir, İstanbul, Tehran, and Isfahan. Under this umbrella, several capacity-building modules covered topics such as project writing and management, funding opportunities, portfolio and statement development, exhibition production, cultural communication strategies, and activist art practices.

By engaging professionals from the field, the program not only fostered knowledge exchange across regions but also equipped emerging artists and cultural practitioners with essential tools for navigating precarious creative environments. This initiative exemplifies how

⁹⁵ İstanbul Kültür Sanat Vakfı (İKSV), “Ortaklaşa Hibe Programı’ndan Kültür-Sanata 11 Milyon TL Destek,” <https://www.iksv.org/tr/haber/ortaklasa-hibe-programi-ndan-kultur-sanata-11-milyon-tl-destek>.

⁹⁶ Teos Kültür Sanat Derneği, “Visibility in Arts Festival,” <https://www.teoskultursanat.com/visibility-in-arts-festival/>.

independent spaces like Hayy Open Space can function as grassroots knowledge platforms, addressing the real and pressing needs of the cultural sector through peer-to-peer, practice-based learning formats. This example illustrates how independent art spaces can operate beyond just exhibition-making by responding to the practical and strategic needs of independent cultural actors. In the absence of formal training structures, such initiatives can play a crucial role in cultivating skills, networks, and institutional literacy among emerging actors.

Hayy Open Space was also one of the twelve initiatives supported by SAHA's Sustainability Fund in 2025, reinforcing its position as a key platform for socially engaged and experimental art in İzmir.

Through its commitment to dialogue and inclusion, Hayy Open Space has become a vital site for cultural production in the city. Still active as of 2025, Hayy Open Space exemplifies the resilience and adaptability of independent art initiatives within Türkiye's changing sociopolitical landscape.

3.1.6. Sarı Denizaltı (2018)

Sarı Denizaltı (*Yellow Submarine* - saridenizalti.com) is an independent art initiative based in Bergama, a historically rich yet culturally peripheral town in the İzmir province. Founded in 2018, the initiative stands out for its commitment to documenting local memory and everyday life through visual narratives such as photography, video, and fanzines. Unlike many İzmir-based collectives that focus on spatial interventions or urban cultural policy, Sarı Denizaltı concentrates on storytelling practices that trace emotional geographies, mundane routines, and the sociopolitical layers of lived environments.

Projects like “Kendine Ait Bir Yol” (*A Path of One's Own*), which utilized psychogeographic walking as a method of reading the city, or “Hiçbir Şey Olmadığında” (*When Nothing*

Happens), which turned attention to the invisible textures of daily life⁹⁷, reflect this documentary and reflective ethos. Their contribution to The Walk project, through the visual installation Memory of the Walls, extended this approach by integrating refugee narratives into the material surface of urban space.⁹⁸ Similarly, their web documentary Sinema Bergama captures a century-long cultural history of the city through cinematic memory.⁹⁹ These efforts illustrate how Sarı Denizaltı positions itself as a grassroots visual archive, creating artistic records that challenge the historical marginalization of non-metropolitan cultural contexts.

3.1.7. Dahili Bellek (2018)

Dahili Bellek (*Internal Memory*) is an independent art and research initiative founded in 2018, focusing on memory, archiving, and spatial narratives. Formed by a group of artists and researchers interested in collective remembering and localized cultural production, the initiative explores the intersection of personal and collective memory, often through site-specific works, exhibitions, and publishing projects. Its name—“Internal Memory”—reflects its conceptual orientation toward introspective cultural inquiry and the inner architectures of remembrance.¹⁰⁰

The initiative has collaborated with other collectives such as 6x6x6 (see below p.90) and contributed to the Karantina Collective (see below p.91) in 2019.¹⁰¹ Dahili Bellek is recognized for its transdisciplinary approach, drawing from oral history, archival research, and social practice to create participatory art events. Through its work, it enhances the

⁹⁷ ArtDog İstanbul, “When Nothing Happens – Exhibition News,” 2023, <https://artdogistanbul.com/>.

⁹⁸ The Walk Project, “Memory of the Walls Installation – Denizli,” 2021, <https://www.saridenizalti.com/thewalk-memory>.

⁹⁹ Sarı Denizaltı, *Sinema Bergama* (web documentary, 2021), <https://www.saridenizalti.com/sinema-bergama>.

¹⁰⁰ Karantina Mekan Kolektif Araştırma Merkezi, “Dahili Bellek,” <https://karantinamekan.com/karantina/dahili-bellek/>.

¹⁰¹ Karantina Mekan Kolektif Araştırma Merkezi, “İzmir’in Renkleri: Karantina Kolektif ve Ortak Bellek,” *İzmir Art*, 2022, <https://www.izmir.art/tr/izmir-in-renkleri-veya-karantina-mekan-kolektif-arastirma-merkezi>.

broader ecosystem of grassroots cultural initiatives in İzmir that aim to decentralize knowledge and reclaim space for shared reflection.¹⁰²

3.1.8. 6x6x6 Art Initiative (2018)

6x6x6 is an independent collective and expansive art initiative founded in İzmir in 2018, designed as a city-wide, multi-site platform to encourage artistic experimentation and collective reflection. The project unfolded across six different neighborhoods—including Karşıyaka, Urla, Seferihisar, Karataş, Kemeraltı, and Alsancak—between June and December 2018, featuring events that addressed themes such as urban memory, migration, micro-history, independent publishing, and sustainability. What set 6x6x6 apart was its itinerant model: exhibitions, concerts, discussions, and performances were held in diverse venues such as cafés, bookshops, artist studios, private apartments, public parks, and even taverns, turning the city into a porous cultural field.

One of the initiative's most lasting contributions was the spontaneous public forum held in Adile Naşit Park in October 2018, where cultural workers and collectives discussed shared challenges related to sustainability and access to space. This gathering directly led to the founding of the Karantina Collective, which aims to establish a shared production and research environment for multiple grassroots initiatives.¹⁰³

Through its emphasis on distributed cultural practices, informal gatherings, and inter-initiative solidarity, 6x6x6 carved out an experimental infrastructure for civic-based cultural mapping. It provided a temporary yet meaningful blueprint for how decentralized, networked cultural programming could function outside of institutional and commercial circuits.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ Bağimsızlar, *Forum Report – Adile Naşit Parkı* (2018), <https://bagimsizlar.org/meetings.php>.

3.1.9. Karantina Collective (2019)

Karantina Collective is a research- and memory-oriented art collective based in İzmir's Karantina district, established in 2019 by three local initiatives—Dahili Bellek, 6x6x6, and KABO—later joined by No:238. Rather than functioning as a single-space art venue, the collective operates through a multi-actor, collaborative structure that hosts exhibitions, artist talks, screenings, fanzine publications, and forums. Its activities center on urban memory, neighborhood-based cultural interaction, and the mapping and archiving of cultural practices across İzmir.

The collective places a strong emphasis on independent publishing (e.g., fanzines, digital zines, podcasts) as a form of counter-archiving and cultural memory construction. Projects such as “Bizi Biz Yapan 90’lar” (*The 1990s That Made Us*), which explored cultural production in Türkiye during the 1990s through a series of talks and workshops, reflect Karantina’s commitment to intergenerational cultural dialogue and non-institutional historical inquiry¹⁰⁴.

In addition to producing its own programs, the collective also acts as a host platform for the activities of its member constituents, enriching İzmir’s independent cultural scene with a strong ethos of co-learning and place-based research. It has received support from national and international cultural funding bodies, including SAHA Association’s Sustainability Fund¹⁰⁵. Still active as of 2025, the collective continues to operate from İzmir’s Karantina–Karataş area, maintaining a critical engagement with the district’s spatial, ecological, and intangible heritage¹⁰⁶.

¹⁰⁴ Karantina Kolektif, “Bizi Biz Yapan 90’lar,” <https://karantinamekan.com>.

¹⁰⁵ SAHA Association, “SAHA Sustainability Fund Recipients,” 2023, <https://www.saha.org.tr>.

¹⁰⁶ Artful Living, “Güncel Performans Sanat ve Kültür Çalışmaları Alanlarına Dair: Komünitas”, <https://www.artfulliving.com.tr/sanat/guncel-performans-sanat-ve-kultur-calismalari-alanlarina-dair-komunitas-i-21976>.

3.1.10. Komünitas İzmir (2020)

Komünitas¹⁰⁷ – İzmir Bağımsız Performans ve Kültür Çalışmaları İşbirliği (*İzmir Independent Performance and Cultural Collaboration*) project, initiated by Açık Stüdyo (*Open Studio*) and coordinated by Şafak Ersözölü with support from Spaces of Culture, brought together a wide network of cultural actors, including performance artists, academics, cultural managers, and independent initiatives. Designed as a temporary yet process-rich platform, the project critically reexamined the concept of cultural management from a non-institutional perspective. Inspired by the Latin term *comitatus*—referring to companionship and equality—the program emphasized horizontality, shared authorship, and solidarity among independent practitioners. Rather than providing managerial solutions, Komünitas focused on building a common language around resource generation, rights advocacy, and sustainable collaboration in the independent arts field.

Held between October and November 2020, the project hosted over twenty-five online events involving more than seventy-five contributors from Türkiye and abroad, exploring themes such as precarity, autonomy, temporary and permanent zones of resistance, and the political dimensions of cultural production. The sessions unfolded in formats such as talks, forums, and presentations, featuring a variety of local and international contributors.¹⁰⁸ This diversity of participants and perspectives transformed Komünitas into a unique experiment in collective cultural reflection in İzmir.

The project also featured an ambitious digital dissemination plan that included an e-book, podcast/vodcast archives, and a collection of digital artworks.¹⁰⁹ However, by 2025, most of these materials are no longer publicly accessible, and project websites such as komunitasizmir.com are inactive. This discrepancy between the intended documentation and

¹⁰⁷ “Komünitas – İzmir Bağımsız Performans ve Kültür Çalışmaları,” directed by Şafak Ersözölü, Açık Stüdyo, 2020, YouTube video, 12:35, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dI5M2ZEm8xY>.

¹⁰⁸ Unlimited Rag, “Komunitas Projesi Dijitalde Başlıyor”, 2025, <https://www.unlimitedrag.com/post/komunitas-projesi-dijitalde-basliyor>.

¹⁰⁹ Spaces of Culture, *Komunitas Project*, 2025, <https://spacesofculture.com/projects/komunitas/>.

the actual availability of project outputs highlights a broader challenge in the independent cultural field: the absence of long-term archiving, memory preservation, and digital sustainability infrastructures. While Komünitas successfully opened up conceptual space for rethinking cultural management, its fading public trace also reveals the fragility of such time-bound, resource-limited initiatives in leaving a lasting impact or accessible knowledge.

3.2. Impact of COVID-19 and the Challenges Facing Independent Cultural Actors in the Post-Pandemic Era

The COVID-19 pandemic had a profound impact on İzmir's cultural landscape, disrupting both institutional and independent cultural activities. Independent cultural actors, already operating under precarious conditions, faced increased challenges due to the pandemic-induced restrictions such as social distancing and periods of lockdown.

In response to the crisis, the İMM implemented the “Crisis Municipalism” policy¹¹⁰, emphasizing culture as a vital component of urban resilience. This approach led to the development of the “Kültürü Direnç ve Kalkınmanın Anahtarı Olarak Güçlendirmek” project (*Boosting Up Culture as a Key for Resilience and Development*), which aimed to sustain cultural production and participation during the pandemic. Key initiatives included:

- Financial and Social Support: Allocation of over 10 million TRY (*equivalent to €490.000 at the time*) to assist local artists, freelancers, and cultural institutions affected by event cancellations. This support included direct financial aid for artists without stable income or social security, as well as assistance for local theaters, the music industry, cinema, plastic arts, and the publishing sector.

¹¹⁰ This section about municipal support is based on publicly available documentation provided by the UCLG Culture Committee and the İzmir Metropolitan Municipality (Agenda21Culture, 2023) For more on this, visit: United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) Culture Committee and İzmir Metropolitan Municipality, *İzmir: Good Practice – Culture Committee Database* (Agenda 21 for Culture, 2023), https://www.obs.agenda21culture.net/sites/default/files/2023-06/%C4%B0zmir_EN.pdf.

- Digital Platforms: Online platforms such as İzmirArt, Bizİzmir, İzmirTube, and the “Şato Kütüphanesi” (*Chateau Library*) have been launched to host virtual cultural events and ensure continued public engagement.
- Hybrid Events: Adaptation of traditional cultural events into hybrid formats, combining limited in-person attendance with online streaming to comply with health guidelines.
- Cultural Solidarity and Volunteering: Integration of culture into the “Biz Varız” (*We are here*)¹¹¹ campaign, fostering solidarity and volunteering. This included initiatives like the “El Ele Müzik Orkestrası” (*Hand-in-Hand Music Orchestra*) and a voluntary fruit harvesting program to support agricultural producers facing labor shortages due to the pandemic.

While municipal support initiatives during the pandemic were essential in mitigating the impact on the cultural sector, they remained largely insufficient in addressing the deep-rooted structural vulnerabilities faced by independent actors. Most independent initiatives in İzmir operate without permanent institutional backing, fixed venues, or long-term funding models. The sudden suspension of in-person events due to lockdowns left many of these actors without a basic source of income or audience engagement.

For small-scale artist-run spaces and collectives, the pandemic intensified existing precarity. Many were forced to postpone or cancel planned exhibitions, workshops, or residency programs because they lacked the resources to adapt to digital formats or meet new health-related infrastructural requirements. Furthermore, access to state-led or municipal funding often requires formal legal status, which many independent actors do not possess. This created an additional barrier to accessing emergency support mechanisms.

¹¹¹ “We Are Here”(Biz Varız) was a solidarity campaign launched by the İzmir Metropolitan Municipality during the COVID-19 pandemic, initially focused on delivering essential support to the elderly and vulnerable populations. Over time, the scope of the campaign was expanded to include the cultural sector, offering support to artists and integrating cultural activities into the broader framework of community resilience. For more on this, visit: İzmir Metropolitan Municipality, *Biz Varız (We Are Here) Solidarity Campaign*, 2020, <https://www.izmir.bel.tr/Haberler/biz-variz-destek-kampanyasi/11292>.

The psychological burden of long-term uncertainty, combined with the emotional toll of isolation, also deeply affected the creative process. Several initiatives shifted their focus toward internal reflection, archiving past projects, or maintaining minimal digital visibility just to “stay present”. In many cases, survival meant scaling down activity, relying on personal networks, or shifting towards informal, collective modes of working—what could be described as a “low-threshold survival mode”.

One of the most distinctive artistic interventions to emerge during the COVID-19 pandemic in İzmir was “Balconnection” (balconnection.com) in 2020, an initiative developed by local artists as a response to the restrictions on public cultural events. As lockdowns and social distancing measures limited access to conventional performance venues, Balconnection reimagined the balcony—a private, domestic threshold—as a new stage for artistic expression. Artists delivered live performances, installations, and sound-based interventions from balconies across the city, reaching audiences directly in their homes or in nearby public spaces.

While Balconnection later gained recognition through İzmir’s participation in the UCLG Leading Cities program, its origins lie in the urgency of pandemic-related constraints and the need to maintain both artistic visibility and public connection. In this sense, the project exemplifies how independent actors developed coping strategies to navigate precarity, not only through creative adaptation but also by reshaping the understanding of public space and collective experience during a time of crisis.

The initiative’s informal, decentralized model created new channels for dialogue between artists and communities, highlighting the value of flexible, citizen-led cultural actions. In doing so, it addressed themes central to cultural resilience: accessibility, co-presence, and the democratization of cultural production beyond institutional formats.

These experiences during the pandemic revealed not only the fragile infrastructure of independent cultural work but also the limited inclusivity of institutional support systems. They underscored the urgent need for broader structural change, including more accessible

funding, flexible support schemes, and recognition of informal and semi-formal cultural actors as legitimate and vital contributors to the urban cultural fabric. While municipal interventions provided some immediate relief, long-term strategies remain essential to bolster the resilience of İzmir's independent cultural scene in the face of future crises.

3.3. “From Here, Where To?”

This section takes its title from the forum series “Buradan Nereye?” (*From Here Where To?*)¹¹², initiated by independent cultural actors in Türkiye to facilitate collective reflection on the conditions, limitations, and potential futures of cultural production. At the same time, it marks a critical turning point in this thesis: a space to consider where İzmir’s civil initiatives may be heading after over a decade of growth, experimentation, and institutional interplay. By focusing on the fifth session of the forum held in İzmir in 2024, this chapter offers a dual perspective—both documenting a rare moment of public critique and projection, and inviting a broader reflection on the evolving trajectories of cultural governance and grassroots cultural work in İzmir.

In February 2024, Hayy Open Space in İzmir hosted the fifth edition of the forum series, bringing together artists, cultural practitioners, academics, and space-based collectives to reflect on the trajectory and recent pause of the İKPG, along with broader cultural policy trends in the city. Organized independently by members of the local scene and the From Here Where To? working group, the forum created a much-needed space for collective reflection, critical mourning, and strategy building in response to a shifting municipal environment and the weakening of previously active participatory structures.

The discussions revisited the transformative potential of İKPG and its offshoots—such as summer schools, cultural mapping, forum series, and shared documentation efforts—while

¹¹² “Buradan Nereye?” is a long-running forum series initiated by independent cultural actors, primarily based in İstanbul. Since 2019, the series has included forums in different cities, with the fifth session held in İzmir. It operates as a self-organized, publicly documented space of collective inquiry. For more on this, visit: “Buradan Nereye?” Forum Serisi, <https://buradannereye.org>.

also confronting the structural vulnerabilities of civil initiatives in İzmir. Participants emphasized the tensions between informal, solidarity-based modes of working and the fragility of institutional support systems. Although the city is often described as more open and dialogic compared to other metropolitan contexts, the forum revealed persistent issues including the lack of sustainable funding, municipal transparency, cross-departmental cultural coordination, and support for inter-district equity.

Rather than providing definitive answers, the forum encouraged a continuation of civic dialogue and a redistribution of responsibility among actors. Key proposals included building new models of public-institutional collaboration, reinforcing archival and data infrastructures, and creating mechanisms for horizontal knowledge transfer. This moment of collective reflexivity offered not only a critical diagnosis of recent losses but also a call for renewed imagination regarding the future of civic cultural agency in İzmir.

3.3.1. Resilience, Collective Efforts and The Uncertain Future of Independent Culture in İzmir

Despite the structural fragilities and challenges described in the previous sections, it is worth noting that many of these independent initiatives have shown remarkable resilience. Several continue to operate today, sustaining cultural production and community engagement through evolving models of collaboration and self-organization. Their ongoing presence signals the potential for bottom-up cultural practices to endure and adapt, even without consistent institutional support.

The continued presence of these independent cultural initiatives in İzmir, despite economic precarity, institutional invisibility, and the disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic, points to the emergence of distinct resilience strategies.¹¹³ These surviving actors share several

¹¹³ Zeynep Gülrü Göker, “Participatory Cultural Governance in Türkiye: Challenges and Potentials” in *Cultural Policy Yearbook*, ed. (İstanbul: BİLGİ Publishing, 2021)

common traits that help explain their relative endurance and adaptability in an often-fragile ecosystem:

- Strong Local Embeddedness and Community Ties

Many long-standing initiatives have cultivated meaningful relationships with their immediate communities. Their ability to engage with local residents, understand neighborhood dynamics, and appreciate urban histories has not only anchored them spatially but also helped them build loyal networks of support.¹¹⁴ Projects such as Darağaç exemplify this place-based engagement through their use of public and semi-public space, collaborative art-making, and integration into the social fabric of their surroundings.

- Flexible, Low-Cost Operational Models

Rather than relying on fixed venues, large staffs, or continuous funding, these initiatives operate with minimal infrastructure.¹¹⁵ This agility enables them to scale up or down based on the availability of resources. In many cases, they utilize shared spaces, volunteer labor, and time-limited projects, which alleviates financial pressure and enhances resilience during crises.

- Informal Collaboration and Networked Solidarity

Sustained cooperation among actors in İzmir's cultural field has proven to be a crucial survival strategy (UCLG Committee on Culture, 2021). Independent initiatives often support one another through resource-sharing, cross-programming, co-hosted events, and increased visibility. These informal collaboration methods help offset the absence of formal funding or institutional partnerships, ultimately strengthening community ties in the process.

¹¹⁴ Serkan Yardımcı, *Kültür İçin Alan ve Katılımcı Yönetişim: İzmir Modeli Üzerine Notlar* (İstanbul: İstanbul Bilgi Üniversitesi Yayınları, 2020).

¹¹⁵ Ayça İnce, "Local Cultural Policies and Decentralisation in Türkiye: Rescaling Culture and the Role of Local Governments," in *Cultural Policy Yearbook 2015*, ed. Murat Akser (İstanbul: İstanbul Bilgi University Press, 2015), 69–86.

- Multidisciplinary and Adaptive Programming

Instead of adhering to a single artistic discipline, many resilient initiatives position themselves as hybrid spaces where visual arts, performance, research, education, and community practice intersect.¹¹⁶ This openness allows them to remain responsive to both cultural trends and the evolving needs of their constituencies.

- A Shared Ethos of Care, Modesty and Experimentation

What often binds these actors together is a value system rooted in humility, mutual care, and a willingness to experiment outside conventional institutional frameworks. This configuration of resilience closely aligns with Serhan Ada's reflections on the independent cultural field in Türkiye, where he identifies a "republic of culture" shaped by informal collaboration, modest infrastructure, and a strong ethic of solidarity. Ada emphasizes that these actors, operating between precarity and creativity, resist normative institutional models not through confrontation but by "staying alive" via care-based, collaborative, and improvisational practices. These forms of cultural work may lack financial security, but they gain their legitimacy and endurance through embeddedness in local contexts and their openness to experimentation and shared values.¹¹⁷ They are not only places of production, but also of dialogue, hospitality, and emotional sustainability.¹¹⁸ These "ethics of practice" often operate beneath formal recognition yet have sustained community-based engagement in meaningful ways.

¹¹⁶ Zeynep Gülrü Göker, "Participatory Cultural Governance in Türkiye: Challenges and Potentials," in *Cultural Policy Yearbook*, (Istanbul: BILGI Publishing, 2021); and Ayça İnce, "Local Cultural Policies and Decentralisation in Türkiye: Rescaling Culture and the Role of Local Governments," in *Cultural Policy Yearbook 2015*, ed. Murat Akser (Istanbul: Istanbul Bilgi University Press, 2015), 69–86. Both authors discuss, from different perspectives, the relational and adaptive dimensions of cultural work in Türkiye's independent cultural scene, which inform the current analysis of resilience in İzmir.

¹¹⁷ Serhan Ada, "Between Precarity and Resilience: Is an Independent Republic of Culture Possible?" in *Cultural Policy Yearbook 2016*, ed. Serhan Ada and Katja Praznik (Istanbul: Istanbul Bilgi University Press, 2016), 9–27.

¹¹⁸ Serkan Yardımcı, *Kültür İçin Alan ve Katılımcı Yönetişim: İzmir Modeli Üzerine Notlar* (İstanbul: İstanbul Bilgi Üniversitesi Yayınları, 2020).

Taken together, these characteristics suggest that resilience in İzmir’s independent cultural field is not simply about financial continuity or institutional growth. Instead, it emerges from relational practices, affective labor, and a flexible understanding of what cultural work entails.¹¹⁹ As İzmir continues to evolve as a cultural city, the experiences of these initiatives provide valuable insights into how bottom-up, community-rooted, and adaptive models of cultural production can be sustained in the long term.

While making definitive predictions about the future of İzmir’s independent cultural scene remains challenging, the adaptive strategies outlined above suggest that these actors are not merely surviving but actively shaping alternative models of cultural sustainability. Their resilience lies less in organizational growth or formal institutional recognition and more in their capacity to remain responsive, collaborative, and deeply rooted in place. However, the long-term viability of such initiatives will depend on whether their values and practices can be recognized, supported, and scaled within broader cultural policy frameworks, such as increased accessibility to funding and capacity development—without compromising their grassroots character. In this regard, the future of independent culture in İzmir remains open-ended, shaped not only by external conditions but also by the continued agency, imagination, and solidarity of the actors themselves.

3.3.2. Where Does the Local Government Stand Today? Continuity, Disruption, and the Politics of Cultural Governance

Over the past decade, İMM has played a leading role in shaping participatory and community-based models of cultural governance, often cited as innovative within the Turkish context. However, as with many local governments, the transition between elected

¹¹⁹ Zeynep Gülrü Göker, “Participatory Cultural Governance in Türkiye: Challenges and Potentials,” in *Cultural Policy Yearbook*, ed. [Editor Name] (Istanbul: BILGI Publishing, 2021) and Ayça İnce, “Local Cultural Policies and Decentralisation in Türkiye: Rescaling Culture and the Role of Local Governments,” in *Cultural Policy Yearbook 2015*, ed. Murat Akser (Istanbul: Istanbul Bilgi University Press, 2015), 69–86.

administrations—whether across or within political parties—can result in significant disruptions to cultural policy. While leadership changes can open new possibilities, they may also lead to the dismantling or neglect of ongoing initiatives, particularly when long-term institutional planning and continuity mechanisms are lacking.

As an example, although not officially declared, the current status of the İzKF remains uncertain. Following its widely publicized launch in 2023—accompanied by a public event that brought together cultural actors from across the city—the Fund was positioned as a pioneering example of transparent, locally governed cultural support. The initial call was framed as a pilot edition, with plans to conduct an impact assessment and issue two open calls per year in future cycles. However, to date, no such assessment has been made public, and no subsequent calls have been announced.

While this discontinuity may not indicate an explicit cancellation, the lack of follow-up, particularly in the absence of transparent communication, may raise concerns among cultural actors, given the Fund's initial promise and symbolic importance. In contexts where independent cultural production already operates under fragile conditions, such unfulfilled expectations not only risk eroding trust between cultural communities and public authorities¹²⁰ but also set a problematic precedent for other local governments exploring similar mechanisms. Moreover, the premature stagnation of a program that had effectively captured the field's interest—through its transparency, inclusiveness, and peer-review mechanisms—may result in a reputational loss for the municipality, which had previously been praised for its participatory approach to cultural governance.¹²¹

Similarly, the administrative restructuring of the Academy and changes in its core team raise questions about the continuity of its intellectual and civic mission. While these decisions may be framed as strategic realignments, they risk undermining the trust, accumulated knowledge, and participatory culture developed over the past decade.

¹²⁰ Lluís Bonet and Emmanuel Négrier, *Cultural Policies in Europe: A Participatory Turn?* (Barcelona: Centre for Contemporary Culture of Barcelona, 2018).

¹²¹ Serkan Yardımcı, *Kültür İçin Alan ve Katılımcı Yönetişim: İzmir Modeli Üzerine Notlar* (İstanbul: İstanbul Bilgi Üniversitesi Yayınları, 2020).

This situation illustrates a broader pattern in cultural policy literature: innovative public programs often remain vulnerable to political turnover, especially in the absence of institutional memory, autonomous governance structures, and mechanisms for accountability.¹²²

That said, it would be neither accurate nor productive to assume that every political transition leads to a decline in cultural policy. The current municipal administration will most likely continue to support culture, possibly under new formats. The challenge, however, lies in ensuring policy continuity while also allowing room for new leadership to introduce fresh perspectives and creative reorientation. Effective cultural governance requires not only innovation and leadership but also institutional stability, multi-stakeholder dialogue, and a long-term vision that transcends electoral cycles.

In the case of İzmir, the way forward may hinge on whether the cultural sector can maintain its participatory ethos, institutional memory, and shared public values—even amid political change.

3.4. Key Findings and Forward-Looking Reflections

3.4.1. SWOT Analysis of Civil Society’s Role in Participatory Cultural Governance in İzmir (2009–2024)

Below is a detailed SWOT analysis summarizing the structural and contextual dynamics that have shaped the development of participatory cultural governance and the role of civil society in İzmir between 2009 and 2024. Each quadrant outlines key factors that influence the resilience, limitations, and future possibilities of independent cultural initiatives in the city.

¹²² Lluís Bonet and Emmanuel Négrier, *Cultural Policies in Europe: A Participatory Turn?* (Barcelona: Centre for Contemporary Culture of Barcelona, 2018); Andy C. Pratt, “Culture and Social Exclusion: The Role of the State in the Subsidy of Cultural Production,” *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 17, no. 4 (2011): 405–418.

Strengths:

- Strong tradition of coexistence and multiculturalism rooted in port city heritage
- Active use of open-air and public spaces fostering inclusive cultural life
- Accumulated experience in participatory cultural governance (İzmir Culture Workshop, İZMEDA, İKPG)
- Completion of international cultural governance programs (UCLG Pilot City 2015–2019, Leading City 2020–2023), which enhanced institutional capacity, encouraged peer learning, and positioned İzmir as a referential case in the global discourse on culture and sustainable cities
- Establishment of intermediary institutions such as the Academy and localized public funding tools (İzKF)
- Emergence of diverse, self-organized, interdisciplinary cultural initiatives
- Informal trust and continuous dialogue between civil society and local government
- Strong survival reflexes among independent cultural actors (flexibility, improvisation, self-learning)
- Development of horizontal, collective decision-making methods
- Peer-to-peer learning, shared knowledge production (e.g., summer schools, community-based workshops)
- Creation of temporary, adaptive, low-cost cultural spaces (e.g., pop-ups, mobile festivals)
- Use of barter-based or solidarity-based economic models in the absence of institutional funding
- International connectivity and increasing creative internal migration strengthening the civic cultural ecosystem

Weaknesses:

- Uneven distribution of cultural infrastructure across central and peripheral districts
- Municipality-led cultural projects and initiatives are prone to political shifts and administrative changes, which often disrupt continuity and institutional memory

- Lack of local governmental safeguards ensuring continuity of participatory mechanisms (e.g., İZMEDA, İzKF)
- Absence of a dedicated cultural policy unit within the municipality
- Limited archiving and documentation practices, weak institutional memory
- The informality of many independent initiatives limits access to formal funding and policy influence
- Exclusion or underrepresentation of informal, unregistered, or grassroots cultural actors
- Heavy dependence on project-based funding and external grants (e.g., EU funds)
- Inconsistent or symbolic civic participation processes without real decision-making power
- Overreliance on individual commitment rather than structural sustainability
- Overreliance on personal networks for continuity
- Volunteer fatigue and burnout in civil initiatives, difficulty retaining teams

Opportunities:

- İzmir's potential as a regional cultural hub in the Mediterranean
- Increasing number of creative professionals migrating from other cities (e.g., İstanbul)
- Growing international recognition and participation in global cultural networks (UCLG, UNESCO)
- Opportunity to establish intermediary bodies for capacity-building and mentorship
- Widespread use of digital tools for visibility, mapping, archiving, and hybrid programming
- Untapped potential for cultural cooperation with peripheral districts and rural areas
- Strong foundation for youth engagement and cross-generational exchange

Threats:

- National-level restrictions on freedom of expression and cultural rights limiting civic engagement

- Political shifts potentially undermining participatory institutions and municipal cultural policies
- Worsening economic conditions threatening the sustainability of independent cultural initiatives
- Nationwide austerity measures reducing municipal capacity to allocate funds for cultural activities
- Limited and unstable public budgets constraining long-term cultural planning
- Urban gentrification reducing access to affordable spaces for artistic production and community-based practices
- Persistent inequality in access to cultural opportunities between central and peripheral districts
- Participatory mechanisms often reduced to symbolic practices without real decision-making power
- Lack of long-term strategic coordination across cultural departments and civic actors
- Structural difficulties in sustaining participatory institutions in the absence of continuity and political support

3.4.2. Key Findings: Civic Agency and the Practice of Cultural Resilience

Reflecting on the trajectory of İzmir's cultural governance in 2016, Serhan Ada emphasized the emerging role of civil society and independent actors as essential components of the city's cultural development. His analysis of İKPG underscored how informal spaces of dialogue and co-creation began to shape a new mode of civic participation in culture. According to Ada, this shift revealed a rising sense of responsibility among İzmir's cultural civil society, including a growing awareness of the need to build shared visibility, to link the local scene

to broader regional and international geographies, and to integrate cultural expression into the city's economic and urban dynamics without compromising its grassroots values.¹²³

This section outlines the key findings derived from the overall analysis presented throughout the thesis. By examining the local dynamics of cultural governance in İzmir, with a particular focus on independent cultural initiatives and municipal frameworks, the research has aimed to understand both structural conditions and lived practices. The findings are informed by a comprehensive review of institutional trajectories, participatory mechanisms, funding tools, and bottom-up cultural strategies discussed in earlier chapters. Rather than presenting a single conclusion, these findings highlight different but interconnected aspects of İzmir's cultural landscape—its challenges, opportunities, and the changing ways cultural actors engage with the city.

3.4.2.1. Structural and Urban Context

- İzmir's legacy as a port city with a multicultural past positively contributes to cultural diversity, openness, and grassroots creativity.
- The urban fabric fosters cultural life by utilizing open-air and informal public spaces, particularly in the city center and coastal districts.
- Cultural venues and events are highly concentrated in central districts like Konak, Alsancak, Karşıyaka, and Bornova. Peripheral districts remain significantly underrepresented in both cultural infrastructure and documented visibility.
- The internal migration of artists and creative professionals from cities like İstanbul has added new layers to the city's cultural landscape.

¹²³ Serhan Ada, "İzmir Kültür Politikası'na Doğru," *Pla+form: İzmir Kültür Pla+formu Girişimi Dergisi* 1 (2015): 19–20, <https://www.izmeda.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/PLATFORM-S01-issuu.pdf>.

3.4.2.2. Civil Society and Independent Initiatives

- Since 2015, the visibility of civil initiatives in the arts and culture sector has increased in İzmir. Although they have not made significant progress within vertical structures of influence, they have cultivated robust horizontal collaborations and solidarity networks.
- Independent initiatives often operate without formal legal status, permanent venues, or a dedicated staff, instead relying on personal networks and collective labor.
- Informal collaborations are a vital means of survival, highlighting shared resources, care work, and horizontal decision-making.
- A shared ethos of modesty, experimentation, and solidarity characterizes the practices of many cultural actors.
- Despite their fragility, many initiatives have sustained themselves for years through adaptability and relational resilience.
- Precarity, along with high levels of strain and fatigue, is widespread, particularly in the absence of institutional support and long-term planning.

3.4.2.3. Governance, Participation, and Policy Innovation

- The 2009 İzmir Culture Workshop marked a turning point in recognizing civil society as a legitimate partner in cultural governance.
- Innovative participatory interfaces like İKPG and the Academy have established structured spaces for civic engagement and dialogue.
- Platforms like İKPG enhanced networks, promoted collaboration among initiatives, and built cultural mapping infrastructures.
- İzKF (2023) marked a milestone in transparent, peer-reviewed municipal support; however, its discontinuation has undermined trust.
- Despite the existence of participatory frameworks, civil society actors in İzmir appear to have limited influence over actual decision-making processes. This local observation reflects broader global trends noted in the UNESCO's "Re|Shaping Policies for

Creativity: Addressing Culture as a Global Public Good” (2022)¹²⁴ report, which states that while most countries claim to have participatory dialogue mechanisms, civil society organizations are still rarely involved in decision-making, monitoring, and evaluation to (re)shape cultural policies.

- Political shifts and changes in leadership pose a significant threat to the continuity of public-civic cultural programs.

3.4.2.4. Continuity, Funding, and Intermediary Needs

- European grants (e.g., CultureCIVIC, Spaces of Culture, TANDEM) have been crucial for project development and visibility.
- Smaller or newer actors find it challenging to fulfill the administrative requirements of international funding, resulting in unequal access.
- There is an urgent need for intermediary bodies or support programs (e.g., capacity-building and mentorship) to bridge the gap between formal institutions and informal initiatives.
- Cultural policies often favor registered NGOs and larger institutions, while excluding more flexible or temporary formats.
- Municipal cultural budgets are limited, and funding is centralized, which restricts experimentation. A substantial portion of these budgets is usually allocated to events and programs commissioned or curated by the municipality itself, thereby limiting the availability of resources for independently organized or community-driven initiatives.
- Documentation and archiving practices are still weak, undermining memory and continuity.

¹²⁴ UNESCO, *Re|Shaping Policies for Creativity: Addressing Culture as a Global Public Good* (Paris: UNESCO Publishing, 2022), <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000380497>.

3.4.2.5. Collaborative Strategies and Cultural Ecosystem

- Initiatives use a variety of creative tactics, including pop-ups, nomadic programming, artist-run spaces, and site-specific interventions.
- Collaboration among collectives and disciplines (art, design, urbanism, activism) is a strength of İzmir's scene.
- Events like “Mekân Deneyimleri” and “From Here, Where To?” showcase the significance of collective reflection.
- Despite geographic and resource disparities, solidarity networks have arisen to exchange knowledge, space, and visibility.
- The ecosystem is defined more by ethical practices of inclusion, care, and mutual learning than by formal indicators.

3.4.2.6. Barriers and Missed Opportunities

- Institutional memory is delicate and often linked to individuals rather than structures.
- Initiatives like KültürLab struggled to maintain momentum despite initial enthusiasm and funding.
- Public-civic mechanisms often rely on political will and lack legal guarantees.
- Participatory structures risk becoming merely symbolic if they are not regularly activated or provided with resources.
- Transparency in fund allocation, continuity of platforms, and consistent public communication remain weak points.
- The lack of impact assessments (e.g., for İzKF) diminishes the ability to measure effectiveness and enhance design.
- Many independent art initiatives in İzmir operate outside formal institutional structures. Their collaborations are typically not defined by official agreements, long-term contracts, or hierarchical arrangements. Instead, they are shaped by personal relationships, mutual trust, and shared intentions—making them informal by nature.

- In the face of financial and structural challenges, many initiatives developed *ad hoc* forms of support, such as sharing resources, spaces, equipment, or visibility, without formalizing these exchanges. These practices, rooted in collective resilience and mutual aid, are more accurately described as “informal collaborations” rather than conventional or structured partnerships.

3.4.3. From Observation to Action: Reflections on the Future of Cultural Governance in İzmir

Drawing on the empirical analysis and conceptual discussions throughout this thesis, the following recommendations aim to address the structural limitations and strategic potentials identified within İzmir’s local cultural ecosystem. The suggestions are organized into two main categories: proposals for local government and public institutions, and proposals for civil society and independent cultural actors. While context-specific, these recommendations are also informed by international best practices and comparative case studies, offering insight into scalable models of cultural governance and support.

3.4.3.1. Public Responsibility in Supporting Independent Culture: Notes for Local Authorities

- Enhance Institutional Memory and Continuity

Establish mechanisms to protect and transmit institutional knowledge across municipal cultural units. This is especially crucial in light of frequent administrative turnover, which often disrupts participatory practices and funding structures such as the İzKF and the Academy’s programs.

As Warren F. Broderick emphasizes in his work on municipal archives, the preservation of local government records should not be guided solely by administrative or legal obligations, but also by their intrinsic value—namely, their role in reflecting the cultural, historical, and

civic identity of a community.¹²⁵ He argues that records such as council minutes, planning documents, and civic correspondence are vital instruments of collective memory and public accountability. In the case of İzmir, where participatory cultural mechanisms and civil society initiatives have often operated through informal or *ad hoc* frameworks, the absence of systematic documentation threatens the sustainability of cultural memory. Without accessible, well-maintained municipal archives, it becomes increasingly difficult to trace the evolution of cultural governance, learn from past practices, or ensure continuity in public-civic collaborations.

A relevant model can be found in Barcelona's Municipal Archives System (SMA), which integrates documentation practices across the city's public administration. Established in 1988, SMA operates as a comprehensive structure that regulates the entire life cycle of municipal records—from creation to archiving—ensuring transparency, legal compliance, and continuity in policy-making.¹²⁶ The importance of such mechanisms has also been emphasized in broader cultural governance frameworks, particularly in the UCLG report *Culture and Sustainable Cities*, which underlines institutional memory as a pillar of sustainable cultural policy.¹²⁷

- Establish An Intermediary Cultural Agency or Office

To support the sustainability and professionalization of independent cultural actors in İzmir, establishing a semi-autonomous intermediary body is highly recommended. This body could provide tailored services such as funding guidance, legal advice, technical assistance, and capacity-building programs. Such a structure could be housed within or affiliated with the

¹²⁵ Warren F. Broderick, *The Intrinsic Value of Local Government Archival Records* (Albany, NY: New York State Archives, 2000), https://www.archives.nysed.gov/common/archives/files/mr_pub40.pdf.

¹²⁶ Ajuntament de Barcelona, *Municipal Archives System Regulations*, https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/arxiuunicipal/arxiucontemporani/sites/default/files/en_municipal_archives_system_regulations.pdf.

¹²⁷ Mercè Gisbert-Camprubí and Jordi Pascual, *Culture and Sustainable Cities* (United Cities and Local Governments [UCLG], 2019).

Academy, but it should operate with a degree of autonomy to ensure continuity across political administrations.

A compelling international example is “Loja Lisboa Cultura”, a municipal support service in Lisbon. Loja provides free, specialized consulting for cultural professionals and organizations on topics such as licensing, taxation, social security, and international mobility. Beyond practical assistance, it fosters a culture of institutional care and professional development for the independent cultural sector. Recognized as a best practice by the UCLG Committee on Culture, Loja serves as a model for intermediary cultural infrastructures that enhance collaboration between public authorities and the independent sector.¹²⁸

The strategic role of such intermediary structures is also emphasized in key international frameworks. For instance, the UCLG’s “Culture 21: Actions” agenda underlines the importance of “independent resource centers” that can connect citizens, institutions, and cultural agents, particularly in decentralized cultural ecosystems. Similarly, UNESCO’s 2022 report on cultural policies for sustainable development advocates for localized and participatory support structures that bridge formal institutions and grassroots cultural practices.¹²⁹

UK-based cultural policy expert, writer, and advocate for the creative economy, John Newbigin¹³⁰ further emphasizes that:

“Intermediaries play a crucial role in connecting the dots between creators, audiences, and policymakers, facilitating a more cohesive cultural ecosystem.”¹³¹

¹²⁸ Catherine Cullen, *Lisbon Pilot City Final Report* (UCLG Committee on Culture, March 2019), 5, https://www.agenda21culture.net/sites/default/files/files/cities/content/informe_lisbon_final-eng_1.pdf.

¹²⁹ UNESCO, *Re|Shaping Policies for Creativity: Addressing Culture as a Global Public Good* (Paris: UNESCO Publishing, 2022), chap. 6, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000380095>.

¹³⁰ John Newbigin was the founding Chair of *Creative England* and has served as the UK Prime Minister’s Special Advisor on the Creative Industries. His work focuses on the intersection of culture, public policy, and the role of intermediary institutions in fostering inclusive cultural ecosystems. He is widely recognized for his contributions to understanding the structural needs of cultural production and for advocating for innovative governance models in the arts and cultural sector.

¹³¹ John Newbigin, “Why a Better Understanding of the Ecosystems of Cultural Production Could Have a Major Impact on Public Policy,” *ResearchGate*, August 2023, <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/373283430>.

- Design Inclusive Participation Frameworks

İzmir should move beyond ad-hoc invitations to consultation events and work toward institutionalizing the participation of informal and unregistered cultural actors in cultural governance. While some independent collectives or artists may be occasionally included in workshops, forums or stakeholder meetings, these forms of engagement remain fragile, inconsistent, and often symbolic. What is needed is a structured and transparent participation framework that goes beyond formally recognized NGOs and acknowledges a wider spectrum of cultural actors—including temporary collectives, non-institutional initiatives, artist-run networks, and spatially fluid formations.

Such a framework should ensure that participation is not limited to offering input but also includes influence over priority-setting, funding strategies, and long-term planning. This may involve more flexible ways for cultural actors to engage—for example, allowing collectives or informal groups to be represented even if they are not formally registered. Local governments might also support facilitation methods that reduce bureaucratic obstacles and enable actors from diverse backgrounds to participate more easily. Such models could be developed not only for the city as a whole but also at the district level, allowing for a reflection of the diversity of local cultural realities.

- Reinforce Cultural Mapping and Data Infrastructure

İzmir would benefit from a renewed and expanded cultural mapping process that builds on the groundwork laid by earlier civil society initiatives, particularly the mapping efforts conducted by İKPG. While İKPG's participatory approach offered an essential model for identifying independent cultural actors and spatial patterns across the city, the project's limited resources and voluntary structure made it challenging to comprehensively and sustainably cover all thirty districts. Given the scale and complexity of such an undertaking, it is recommended that the municipality assume a more proactive role in supporting updated and participatory cultural mapping efforts.

These efforts should aim to track institutional actors as well as informal and underrepresented cultural practices, with particular attention paid to spatial inequalities and access gaps. In addition to generating valuable data for policy-making, such a process could foster transparency and strengthen collaboration between public authorities and the independent cultural sector.

Ideally, mapping should be designed as an ongoing, multi-layered, iterative process—rather than a one-off project—and should be openly accessible to policymakers and citizens. According to Keskiner, one of the key challenges in cultural mapping lies in the tension between intensive, time-bound documentation efforts and the rapidly shifting realities of the field. Inventories and maps carefully assembled through collective labor often lose their relevance in the face of sudden disruptions, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, or through new waves of activity that emerge soon after, such as the opening of new independent venues. Without mechanisms for regular updates and institutional continuity, even the most comprehensive mappings risk becoming obsolete.¹³²

- Enhance Transparency and Communication Channels

İMM should reinforce its commitment to transparency and public accountability in cultural governance by enhancing the clarity, accessibility, and visibility of its funding mechanisms. One critical opportunity lies in revisiting and revitalizing the İzKF, which was piloted as a promising step toward more participatory and strategic cultural funding. While the pilot phase successfully supported several projects, its full potential—including an impact assessment process and structured feedback loops—has yet to be realized.

Completing the pilot's evaluation phase and using its findings to inform a revised, updated version of the fund would demonstrate the municipality's responsiveness to stakeholder input and dedication to institutional learning. Relaunching İzKF with improved transparency, such as publishing evaluation criteria, final reports, and funding results, would not only increase

¹³² Sarp Keskiner, "Sanat, Yaratıcı Endüstriler ve Kültür Ekonomisi Oturumu," *Cumhuriyetin II. Yüzyılında Kültür ve Sanatın Geleceği*, İzmir Büyükşehir Belediyesi, May 7, 2023.

trust among cultural actors but also signal a long-term commitment to fairness and openness in public cultural policy.

- Facilitate Mentorship and Knowledge Transfer Programs

To support the development of younger and emerging cultural actors in İzmir, the municipality should facilitate structured mentorship programs that foster intergenerational learning and collaborative production. These initiatives could connect early-career artists with experienced professionals from the cultural field, promoting knowledge transfer, critical dialogue, and artistic co-creation.

Such models could be integrated into municipal grant schemes or coordinated through an intermediary structure affiliated with the Academy. International precedents offer relevant inspiration. For example, Maison des Métallos (maisondesmetallos.paris), “CoOP”¹³³ and “Les Nouveaux Métallos”¹³⁴ (*New Métallos*) programs in Paris provide a collaborative platform where experienced artists and young practitioners co-develop public-facing artistic projects. Similarly, La Villette’s artist residency schemes in Paris include mentorship components that connect young creators with cultural institutions and seasoned professionals.¹³⁵

In İzmir, a mentorship-based support system would not only bridge generational divides in the cultural sector but also promote collective learning and enhance long-term sustainability among independent initiatives.

- Promote Cultural Diversity and Inclusion

Municipal cultural strategies should actively support diverse cultural expressions and vulnerable groups, including migrant artists and underrepresented voices. Berlin's

¹³³ The “CoOP program at Maison des Métallos in Paris is a collaborative artistic platform where experienced cultural professionals and emerging artists co-develop public-oriented creative projects through long-term residencies and participatory processes.

¹³⁴ Maison des Métallos, “Les Nouveaux Métallos”, <https://www.maisondesmetallos.paris/les-nouveaux-metallos>.

¹³⁵ La Villette, “Residency and Support Programs”, https://www.lavillette.com/page/les-residences_a652/1.

Weltoffenes Berlin program is a strong example: “The program aims to protect artists and culture professionals who are at risk or experiencing persecution, providing them with places of shelter and opportunities for artistic collaboration.”¹³⁶ İzmir can develop similar protection and exchange mechanisms, particularly within the context of international networks and Mediterranean cooperation platforms.

- Foster Translocal and International Cultural Networks

Building on its already active engagement with international cultural policy platforms such as the UCLG Culture Committee, Culture Action Europe, and the UNESCO Creative Cities Network, İzmir should continue to cultivate and expand these connections. Such relationships have contributed to the city’s visibility and positioned it as a significant voice in debates on culture-led urban development. Sustaining and fostering this engagement would strengthen İzmir’s strategic presence within broader transnational cultural dialogues, particularly across the Mediterranean region, where examples such as Marseille’s Euro-Mediterranean¹³⁷ cultural strategy illustrate the potential of structured cooperation.

Beyond international ties, İzmir could also play a pioneering role in developing a regional cultural network across the Northern Aegean. This could involve interconnecting the cultural mappings, independent initiatives, and public–civil collaborations of nearby cities and districts, creating a collaborative ecosystem where knowledge, practices, and audiences circulate across municipal borders. Such an initiative would support the survival and

¹³⁶ Berlin Senate Department for Culture and Europe, “Weltoffenes Berlin Program”, <https://www.berlin.de/sen/kultur/en/funding/funding-programmes/weltoffenes-berlin/>.

¹³⁷ The *Forum des Mondes Méditerranéens*, held in Marseille in February 2022, brought together a wide range of civil society actors, local governments, academics, and cultural practitioners from across the Mediterranean region. Organized under the auspices of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the forum aimed to promote inclusive, sustainable, and collaborative solutions to shared regional challenges, with thematic focus areas including culture, heritage, education, environment, and civic participation. The event served as a transnational platform for dialogue and project exchange, reflecting a growing interest in bottom-up and cross-border cooperation in the Mediterranean space.

Ministère de l’Europe et des Affaires étrangères, “Forum des mondes méditerranéens : un plaidoyer pour la Méditerranée (7-8 février 2022),” <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/politique-etrangere-de-la-france/societe-civile-et-volontariat/evenements-incluant-la-societe-civile/forum-des-mondes-mediterraneens-un-plaidoyer-pour-la-meditteranee-7-et-8/>.

sustainability of independent cultural actors in medium-sized or less-central urban contexts and contribute to a more integrated and resilient regional cultural infrastructure.

- **Build Internal Capacity for Cultural Policy and Practice**

In addition to external collaborations and funding schemes, IMM must invest in the ongoing professional development of its staff in the culture and arts departments. Municipal officers responsible for cultural programming, policymaking, and coordination should receive periodic training to strengthen their knowledge and capacity in key areas such as cultural policy development, impact assessment, data collection and analysis, and international good practices.

Ideally designed in collaboration with academic institutions, cultural experts, or international partners, these training sessions could help align local strategies with global debates and enhance the municipality's ability to respond to evolving cultural needs. Moreover, they should not be one-off initiatives but rather part of a regularly updated capacity-building framework that ensures staff remain informed about current developments in cultural governance, both nationally and globally.

3.4.3.2. Pathways and Strategic Considerations for Civil Society

- **From Solidarity to Strategic Advocacy**

Independent cultural initiatives in İzmir have fostered a robust culture of solidarity, often responding collectively to moments of crisis, institutional neglect, or resource scarcity. While these horizontal relationships are essential for resilience, there is an increasing need to move beyond reactive coordination toward sustained and strategic advocacy. This would involve creating more durable structures, such as long-term coalitions or thematic alliances, through which actors can articulate shared positions and policy demands.

Instead of being limited to moments of urgency, such networks could operate as organized platforms for engaging with local authorities, influencing policy agendas, and asserting the

collective agency of the independent cultural sector. One concrete step could be establishing a “policy watch platform”¹³⁸—a shared space to monitor, analyze, and respond to developments in cultural policy at both the municipal and national levels. Such a platform could also serve as a forum for creating joint proposals, coordinating advocacy campaigns, and amplifying the voices of smaller or more precarious actors within the ecosystem.

- Organizing Solidarity: Towards a Collective Infrastructure of Care and Contribution

In İzmir, informal and often spontaneous collaborations among independent cultural actors have played a vital role in sustaining artistic production in the absence of stable institutional infrastructure. These alliances—frequently founded on trust, urgency, and mutual care—illustrate the foundations of a decentralized yet interdependent cultural ecosystem. However, such networks need to evolve into more defined and resilient platforms to ensure continuity and impact.

Rather than replicating formal roles or institutional structures, future collaboration models could be organized around shared capabilities and available resources—spaces, equipment, technical knowledge, human labor, or communication tools. This approach would shift the focus from “what one is” to “what one can contribute,” enabling a circular economy of solidarity within the cultural field. A city-wide mutual support platform could operationalize this model, transforming the spirit of *imece*—communal labor—into an organized, long-term resource-sharing system. In this context, concepts such as “labor exchange” (*emek takası*) become relevant, proposing alternative value systems in which cultural actors contribute time, skills, or space instead of financial capital, fostering reciprocity and interdependence outside traditional market logics.

¹³⁸ While trade unions are formal legal entities that represent individual workers in matters related to employment, wages, and social rights, a policy watch platform in the cultural field would operate as an informal, collective mechanism. Its aim would not be to negotiate working conditions, but rather to monitor, interpret, and influence cultural policy processes—especially on behalf of independent and structurally unrepresented actors.

Crucially, this logic of redistribution should also extend to how financial resources—especially those from public or philanthropic funds—are managed. Instead of adopting a self-contained, project-based mindset in which one initiative claims the entirety of a proposal, cultural actors could proactively suggest including others where relevant. This approach not only decentralizes financial benefits but also amplifies participation, visibility, and cross-pollination within the local cultural field. It fosters a relational practice of co-ownership, where many individuals, collectives, and artistic voices are involved, ultimately making the “sustainable imece” more viable and vibrant.

- Place-Based Cultural Ecosystems: Toward Neighborhood-Driven Cultural Strategies

The Abasto Barrio Cultural project in Buenos Aires provides a powerful example of how culture can shape urban identity and foster inclusive territorial development. Although Abasto is not officially recognized as an administrative district, it is understood as a “cultural neighborhood”—a symbolic and functional space co-constructed by independent cultural venues, migrant communities, artists, and residents. The initiative spans several neighborhoods (Balvanera, Almagro, Once, among others), interlinking over 40 cultural organizations and 10 migrant communities through collaborative programming, public–civil cooperation, and spatial storytelling.¹³⁹

¹³⁹ Gobierno de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires, “Abasto Barrio Cultural: Un Proyecto Colectivo”, <https://obs.agenda21culture.net/index.php/en/good-practices/abasto-barrio-cultural>.

3.1. Illustrative Map of the Abasto Cultural Neighborhood, Buenos Aires



(Source: *Revista El Abasto*, “Mapeando Abasto,” <https://www.revistaelabasto.com.ar/mapeando-abasto/>.)

Crucially, the project has not only enhanced cultural participation but has also fostered local ownership, improved intergenerational and intercultural dialogue, and enabled grassroots cultural actors to play a more active role in shaping the city's cultural narrative. Rather than imposing a top-down identity, Abasto was built through consultations, horizontal governance, and the recognition of culture as a transformative force at the neighborhood level.

In the case of İzmir, this model could inspire the development of district-based cultural strategies that connect existing independent spaces, community actors, and residents through neighborhood-scale collaboration. For example, areas such as Konak, Karşıyaka, or Bornova—where cultural activity is already vibrant yet fragmented—could be supported as emerging “cultural neighborhoods” alongside Bayraklı, Buca, Çiğli, and others. These would be defined not by administrative borders but by shared histories, spatial practices, and cultural dynamics.

By mapping cultural assets, encouraging the shared use of space, and fostering joint programming with participation from youth, women, and displaced communities, İzmir could create frameworks for relational, place-based cultural planning. This bottom-up territorial approach would not only strengthen cultural identities and collaboration at the micro-urban scale but also support the sustainability of independent actors and rebalance cultural investments across the city.

- Establish Financial Independence Through Self-Generated Resources

While sustainability remains a favored concept in cultural policy discourse, particularly within the frameworks of creative industries, it often appears disconnected from the lived realities of independent cultural actors. In this context, long-term strategies associated with sustainability may feel inaccessible or even irrelevant, especially when actors are preoccupied with urgent needs, institutional fragility, and funding precarity. As a result,

many initiatives instead develop short-term, adaptive, and solidarity-driven practices to survive and maintain cultural production.¹⁴⁰

Instead of primarily relying on public or international funding cycles—which are often short-term, competitive, and administratively burdensome—independent cultural initiatives in İzmir could focus on building their own financial resilience by generating a significant portion of their operational income through self-initiated strategies.

This might involve organizing paid workshops, offering consultancy in artistic or cultural facilitation, renting shared spaces for aligned uses, or co-producing limited-run editions of their work (e.g., publications, design objects, or performances). Furthermore, cost-reduction strategies such as co-leasing studios or production spaces, sharing administrative or technical resources, or implementing a rotating schedule can help decrease reliance on external aid.

This approach not only enhances long-term sustainability but also fosters a deeper sense of ownership, flexibility, and autonomy while mitigating the structural inertia often caused by overreliance on external grants.

- Actively Contribute to Cultural Policy Dialogues and Agenda-Setting

Independent cultural actors should proactively engage in micro-cultural policy processes, not only by participating in municipal working groups or advisory boards where possible, but also by initiating or joining autonomous platforms that enable bottom-up dialogue and collective critique. Especially in contexts where access to formal mechanisms is restricted or selective, the establishment of parallel or counter-public spaces becomes essential to ensure the inclusion of diverse perspectives and to maintain civic pressure on institutions.

A notable example is bagimsizlar.org, an autonomous platform created by independent cultural practitioners in Türkiye. Formed in response to the lack of inclusive, transparent, and accountable cultural policymaking structures, bagimsizlar.org functions as a critical space for knowledge exchange, collective declarations, advocacy, and cultural policy monitoring.

¹⁴⁰ Sarp Keskiner, “Sanat, Yaratıcı Endüstriler ve Kültür Ekonomisi Oturumu,” *Cumhuriyetin II. Yüzyılında Kültür ve Sanatın Geleceği*, İzmir Büyükşehir Belediyesi, May 7, 2023.

Through online publications, open letters, and public calls, it brings together independent actors across different disciplines and cities to shape shared agendas, demand recognition, and formulate proposals for cultural rights, equity, and sustainability.

Importantly, such initiatives should not be limited to listing demands or voicing discontent. They should also serve as spaces for co-developing solutions and articulating how independent actors themselves can contribute to implementation. By identifying potential roles, resources, and collaborative strategies, autonomous civil society platforms can move from reactive to proactive modes of engagement, fostering more reciprocal and transformative policy dialogue.

- Reclaim and Animate Open and Public Spaces Through Cultural Practice

In contexts where access to traditional venues and institutional infrastructure is limited, independent cultural initiatives can continue to leverage parks, streets, squares, and underutilized urban areas as platforms for cultural expression and civic encounter. Mobile, temporary, or site-specific cultural formats—such as open-air screenings, ephemeral installations, walking performances, or traveling workshops—not only decentralize cultural visibility but also democratize participation by reaching broader and more diverse publics.

In İzmir, the Darağaç Initiative provides a compelling example of how independent cultural actors can reclaim public space through artistic practice. As mentioned earlier, located in a former industrial neighborhood, Darağaç emerged from the collective efforts of artists and cultural practitioners who transformed streets, building façades, and abandoned lots into a dynamic exhibition zone. Without relying on institutional venues or municipal permissions, they fostered a sustained engagement with the local community and introduced critical, experimental artistic formats into the everyday urban fabric. Through its open, collaborative structure and long-term spatial commitment, Darağaç demonstrates how grassroots cultural practices can activate the public realm while simultaneously proposing alternative modes of cultural production and belonging.

Similarly, Communitism¹⁴¹, an initiative based in Athens, reclaims underused heritage buildings by negotiating the occupation and use of abandoned heritage properties to house creative professionals and communities for little or no rent. Since 2015, the initiative has brought together creative professionals and local residents to co-inhabit and repurpose abandoned buildings through artistic and civic activities. Instead of operating within formal institutional structures, Communitism fosters collaborative restoration and collective use of space in exchange for rent-free or low-cost access. This model not only preserves architectural heritage but also creates inclusive, self-organized spaces for cultural production and experimentation.

Such practices also help reduce dependency on costly infrastructure, promote flexible and adaptive cultural strategies, and counter the centralization of resources and visibility. By reclaiming urban space as a cultural common, independent initiatives not only expand cultural access but also encourage community interaction, shared ownership of urban space, and inclusive cultural participation.

¹⁴¹ Communitism. “Communitism”, Tiny Spaces Deep Connections.
<https://tinyspaces.eu/project/communitism/>.

CONCLUSION

This thesis set out to investigate the evolving role of civil society as an actor in cultural governance in İzmir between 2009 and 2024, with a particular emphasis on the emergence of independent cultural initiatives and participatory mechanisms initiated or supported by the local government. Against the backdrop of increasing global attention to cultural rights, local democracy, and sustainable urban development, the research examined İzmir's trajectory through the lens of participatory cultural policy innovation, civic engagement, and institutional transformation.

Building on a combination of document analysis and experiential insight, the study traced the historical developments following the İzmir Culture Workshop of 2009, identifying key milestones such as the establishment of the İzmir Mediterranean Academy, the İzmir Cultural Pla+form Initiative (İKPG), and the creation of the İzmir Culture Fund (İzKF). These institutional experiments were assessed not only in terms of their structural innovations but also in terms of their capacity to enable grassroots cultural agency, foster informal networks, and diversify urban cultural life.

The findings of this study indicate that İzmir has made significant progress in institutionalizing participatory cultural governance, driven by a locally grounded yet internationally informed vision. Through its involvement in global programs such as the UCLG Pilot Cities (2015–2019) and Leading Cities (2020–2023), İzmir has aligned itself with contemporary global frameworks that emphasize culture as the fourth pillar of sustainable development. These experiences have strengthened the city's institutional reflexes and increased its visibility as a referential actor in international cultural networks.

The city's cultural ecosystem benefits from several structural advantages: a legacy of a long-standing tradition of multiculturalism and coexistence; the use of open-air and public spaces for artistic and civic expression; and a growing number of self-organized, interdisciplinary cultural initiatives. In particular, İzmir's port city Mediterranean identity and its socio-

political climate—perceived as more liberal and inclusive compared to other metropolitan centers—have fostered a favorable environment for cultural experimentation and civic autonomy.

At the same time, the research has revealed a series of weaknesses and systemic limitations. The uneven distribution of cultural infrastructure, the lack of institutional continuity, and the dependence on project-based or externally funded models represent persistent structural challenges. Many participatory mechanisms, though promising in intent, suffer from symbolic implementation or are vulnerable to political shifts. The absence of a long-term vision shared across cultural departments and civil society actors further complicates sustained collaboration. Despite their adaptability and resilience, independent initiatives continue to operate with limited resources, minimal legal protection, and a significant reliance on individual leadership.

The SWOT analysis presented in Chapter Three provides a synthesis of the city's cultural governance environment. It reveals a landscape characterized by both innovation and fragility. On one hand, İzmir has developed intermediary structures such as the Academy, which serve as hybrid platforms bridging public institutions and civic actors. On the other, such institutions remain highly dependent on political will and are thus prone to discontinuity with changes in leadership or shifting agendas.

The growing tension between the creative potential of independent actors and the structural barriers they face—particularly those related to access to space, sustainable funding, and decision-making platforms—demands urgent attention. Furthermore, national-level restrictions on freedom of expression and municipal austerity measures have exacerbated precarity within the cultural field, narrowing the civic space and limiting the transformative potential of participatory cultural policy.

Although this research provides grounded insights into the cultural governance dynamics of İzmir and the evolving contributions of civil society actors, certain limitations should be acknowledged. First and foremost, the study heavily draws on the author's direct

involvement in various cultural governance, research and reporting processes in İzmir, including the İzmir Culture Workshop, İzmirDeniz design project and the development of the İzmir Culture Fund. This embedded perspective has allowed for detailed, practice-based insights, but it may also have limited the inclusion of external or dissenting viewpoints.

Due to time and scope constraints, this thesis does not include fieldwork such as interviews or surveys with a broader range of actors, especially artists, cultural workers, or civil society members who may have experienced these processes differently. Likewise, the study does not cover the public reception of key policies or initiatives—such as the suspension of the İzKF or the recent restructuring of the Academy—due to a lack of available documentation or formal feedback mechanisms.

Moreover, the limited availability of systematically archived municipal documents, cultural policy drafts, and evaluation reports posed a challenge in assessing the continuity and institutional memory of participatory efforts. While many insights were drawn from publications, reports, and project materials, there remains a gap in measuring the tangible and long-term impact of these initiatives on the broader cultural field.

Several challenges were encountered during the research process. One significant difficulty was the lack of systematic evaluation or written feedback regarding discontinued cultural policies and projects—both on the municipal side and among civil society initiatives. In many cases, there were no official explanations or impact assessments available to clarify why certain cultural projects or participatory mechanisms were suspended or abandoned. This lack of documentation made it difficult to assess these developments from an evidence-based perspective. As a result, it was sometimes challenging to distinguish between structural causes and personal or subjective interpretations shared informally by stakeholders.

Another challenge was conceptual: identifying civil society in the cultural field requires moving beyond the formal definitions (e.g., registered NGOs) and embracing the fluid, informal, and often precarious nature of independent initiatives. Capturing these dynamics

required adopting a flexible methodological approach, which at times created tensions between narrative depth and analytical clarity.

Finally, as someone with long-term professional involvement in this ecosystem, the author navigated a delicate balance between insider knowledge and critical distance. Although care was taken to maintain objectivity, this positioning inevitably shaped the framing of certain arguments and the emphasis placed on specific practices or actors.

This thesis should be viewed as a step toward a more comprehensive and participatory understanding of cultural governance in İzmir. Future research could build on this foundation by engaging in fieldwork with a wider range of actors, including marginalized cultural groups, informal collectives, and diverse audiences. Longitudinal studies tracking the evolution of civic participation and funding distribution over time could provide valuable evidence to assess the sustainability and impact of public policies.

Moreover, comparative studies between İzmir and other cities in Türkiye or in the Mediterranean region—particularly those with similar cultural governance models—could illuminate common challenges and transferable strategies. Additionally, more attention could be given to the role of digital tools, platforms, and media in shaping civic participation in culture, particularly in the post-pandemic context.

What emerges from this study is the notion that independent cultural actors are not peripheral participants but essential co-authors of the city's cultural trajectory. Their presence enriches the urban fabric with plural voices, experimental formats, and community-rooted practices. If appropriately supported and recognized, they have the capacity to transform not only the cultural landscape but also the democratic character of urban governance.

İzmir's journey over the past fifteen years reflects a broader shift in the cultural policy discourse—from government to governance, from centralized models to distributed systems of collaboration. This transition, while still incomplete, holds valuable lessons not only for İzmir but for other cities navigating similar dynamics.

As global crises—whether political, ecological, or economic—continue to reshape the conditions of urban life, culture must be recognized as both a resource and a fundamental right. Building on its accumulated experience, İzmir now has the opportunity to institutionalize its participatory practices, strengthen its civic networks, and position itself as a resilient, inclusive, and culturally democratic city in the Mediterranean and beyond.

In this regard, the thesis not only documents a fifteen-year-long trajectory of participatory cultural governance in İzmir but also aims to contribute to broader debates on the role of civil society in shaping equitable, sustainable, and democratic urban cultural policies.

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