In recent decades, culture has become recognized as playing a fundamental role in the sustainable development of cities. Increasingly, culture has been appropriated for non-cultural purposes, to achieve objectives in other areas of public policy intervention, such as urban regeneration and economic growth. However, the challenge is to provide evidence of the effects of cultural policies and how culture can change, in a sustainable way, the future of a city and its community.

In the context of sustainability, recognizing the direct or indirect contributions of culture to the development of cities and their communities has many dimensions and depends on analyzing valid knowledge over a certain period of time. Besides conceptual complexity, territorial particularities and actors’ motivations in urban political initiatives (Barbieri, Partal and Merino, 2011) makes it extremely difficult to ‘measure’ culture’s real impact. It seems particularly important to perceive beyond the instrumental ability of culture to catalyze economic development or improve the built environment of cities.

In this study, in order to provide ‘thick descriptions’ (Geertz, 1973) and to discuss the role of culture in urban development policies, a theoretical framework was designed to guide the analysis. Looking for the dynamics between structural forces and governance capability (Healey, 2007; Reimer and Blotevogel, 2012), this work takes into account several relational elements: the legal and administrative framework that define the locus of power, institutional diversity and differences in terms of evolution and development (Brenner, 2004); the policy processes, ideas, goals and priorities that are pursued, governance models and policy instruments; and the constellation of political actors involved (or excluded) and the discourses employed by them – repertoires of meaning that are produced, negotiated and performed within power relations.

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