

We Art the Change

How working with Manchester shaped Mantova’s arts and culture sector as a driver for positive change on climate

Emanuele Salmin, Fundraising and EU Projects Office, Mantova Municipality, March 2021



Giuseppe Gradella photo for the “Guardani. Io sono Mantova” exhibition - a C-Change Season event

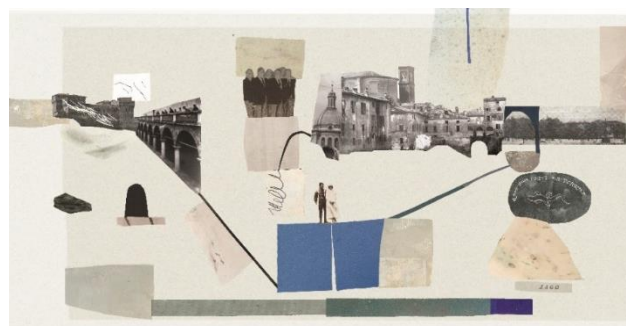
There is no doubt the climate crisis is *the* greatest challenge faced by humanity. It is about nothing less than our survival as a species, safeguarding our planet and all the forms of life which it supports, including ourselves. If it’s so important, why, to use the words of Greta Thunberg, are we not acting like our house is on fire?

When faced with such an overwhelming and complex challenge, this response, or indeed lack of, is very human. Maybe what will really make the difference and spur us on to protect what we love is a gentle push, a positive message told in the right way, connecting with our values and our emotions.

Manchester’s experience with cultural collaboration on climate action and engagement. Pablo Picasso once said “*Every now and then one paints a picture that seems to have opened a door and serves as a stepping stone to other things*”. Unlikely as it may sound, this quote describes Mantova’s C-Change journey very well. It opened a door for us to something we hadn’t considered before: the role the arts and culture could play in connecting with the people in our city on climate and inspiring them to act.

In 2018, Mantova joined C-Change, an [URBACT](#)-funded network of cities aiming to learn from and build on

The Manchester Arts Sustainability Team (MAST) started out in 2011, as a sector response to the city’s call for action on its first climate change strategy *Manchester: A Certain Future 2010-2020*. Today, MAST has about 50 members working collectively on climate action and engagement. As one of 10 pioneer sectors which make up the [Manchester Climate Change Partnership](#) it is developing a plan of action aligned with the city’s zero carbon priorities. From the start, Manchester recognised that the zero-carbon transition requires a values and culture shift, and that by doing what it does best – engaging with people’s hearts and minds on what is happening in our society - the arts and culture is uniquely placed to support such a shift.



Marta Lonardi artwork for the “Guardani. Io sono Mantova” exhibition - a C-Change Season event

When the Municipality of Mantova sent me to Manchester to learn more about MAST, I was thrilled. Seeing such a mixed group - from the Royal Exchange Theatre and the BBC to Manchester International Festival and Manchester Pride - working towards a common goal and seeing what climate action looked like in places like HOME, one of the city's leading cultural venues - I was not disappointed. Seeing the commitment of those involved and what they had achieved was inspirational.

The people I met really understood the issues around climate change and what was at stake, and were acting on this. Over the years, this understanding and action had been informed in different ways: through working closely with the environmental arts charity [Julie's Bicycle](#) in the early years, to the webinars, peer exchange events and carbon footprint tools which Julie's Bicycle provides under [Arts Council England's environmental programme](#) and Manchester's own [Carbon Literacy Project](#) training. What also struck me was how MAST's members made what they were doing publicly visible: from a live energy display in a studio lobby to sustainable sourcing information on the menu and a Carbon Literacy certificate the box office.

So how could we do something similar in a small city in Northern Italy?! With a population of 50,000, Mantova may be a small city, but our culture sector is not. A UNESCO World Heritage Site, we are known for our medieval and Renaissance cityscape. But it's not only palazzos and Renaissance art. Each year we host hundreds of cultural events, including Italy's most important literature festival, and have a thriving contemporary cultural and creative scene. The municipality had already been working with a group of cultural stakeholders through a previous URBACT network, so we started by simply asking if they were interested in working on climate change.

Some were just not interested. Some got on board straight away. Once we had established the initial C-Change group, we spent a lot of time and effort trying to convince others to join, time which in retrospect would have been better spent focusing on the group of passionate, committed people we had to start with. This was a key lesson, something we had witnessed in Manchester: the power of bringing together passionate, committed people – people like Festival Letteratura's Arianna Tonelli, Lorenza Salati from the creative hub R84 and Mantova Chamber Orchestra's Valentina Pavesi. This is what ultimately made C-Change a success beyond our expectations.



Teatro Magro performances on the sustainability of public transport

C-Change was led on the municipality’s side by a team made up by myself from the Fundraising and EU projects Office, Giulia Pecchini from the Culture and Tourism Department and Elisa Parisi from the Environmental Department. Bringing our own passion and commitment, we worked closely with colleagues and councillors involved in city environmental policy, cultural events, venues and heritage. Combining our expertise was invaluable and our think-tank type approach brought real results, from a new ‘plastic-free’ city strategy including culture, to the introduction of environmental criteria in our UNESCO management plan.

As we made progress on policy, Giulia, Elisa and I were also working to support the local C-Change group. At the start, a survey on environmental practice in the city’s main cultural venues was helpful in informing our approach. Involving environmental experts in the group - a twist on the MAST model - also helped foster mentoring between group members. We put in place a range of sector support measures from sustainable events training and guidelines to an online tool to track audience travel impacts.

Ultimately, we wanted the group to become more independent. We asked them what they needed and this led to us take on two roles. The first was as sector ambassadors, pushing for more sustainable services and solutions for cultural events and venues, from reusable cup schemes and bio-gas buses to [‘bike-ins’](#), a novel approach to Covid-secure outdoor cultural events. The second was as fund-raisers. In the first year alone, we secured over €50,000 for additional C-Change activities. Seeing the municipality’s commitment kept the group motivated.



Mantova's Bike-In - COVID-secure outdoor events, summer 2020

In summer 2020, the local group took on a new identity under the name of [ARC³A](#). Today its 15 members include a mix of cultural organisations such as Trame Sonore - Mantova’s Chamber Music Festival, Segni d’Infanzia - a community arts association - and the Palazzo Te and Palazzo Ducale heritage sites. And they took action in many different ways. Without Frontiers became the first festival to implement the city’s plastic-free strategy. Festivaletteratura made climate change a key programming theme and worked to reduce the impact of its canteen, which each year serves food to hundreds of volunteers. Woodstock MusicAcustica reduced energy use and waste, and even changed its name to the C-Change Carbon Free Acoustic Music Festival!



We provided small grants for six actions which became our C-Change Season in summer 2020, a series of Covid-adapted events. These included the chamber orchestra’s children’s workshops using recycled instruments, inspired by Águeda, our Portuguese C-Change partner; Festival Letteratura’s installation visualising greenhouse gas emissions; a climate-change themed photography exhibition; a competition for amateur photographers on what climate change meant to them, and; Segni d’Infanzia’s children’s radio programmes on Europe and climate

change. The man behind the YouTube hit ‘In Viaggio Con Harry’, on his travels around the world in an eco-renovated camper van, has made a documentary featuring the people behind these actions. The documentary will launch at the C-Change Festival planned for 2021.



Zero Beat & Mantova Chamber Orchestra workshop on using recycled instruments and Festaletteratura's greenhouse gas emissions visualisation and offsetting installation during Mantova's C-Change Season 2020

Through C-Change, we were able not only to learn from Manchester but to benefit from peer learning and exchange with the other C-Change cities, all, like us, trying to adopt a similar approach. This opened many doors for Mantova. And we were guided throughout, as a city and as a group, by our URBACT Lead Expert, Claire Buckley - always there with the right suggestion at the right time. Claire was also able to bring in the benefit of her experience as a member of the [Julie's Bicycle](#) team involved with MAST from its very early days.

ARC³A's journey has just started. It has already demonstrated its value: from individual and collective action on climate and environment, to new funding opportunities, collaborations and solutions and, last but not least, connecting with the people of our city on climate change. While Covid has brought a whole new set of challenges and the arts and culture has been particularly hard hit, ARC³A has the potential to become a unifying force for Mantova's culture sector as it looks towards the future and understands that we need a new normal, a recovery based on protecting what we love and need to survive and thrive. Two years since we first started on our C-Change journey, we are now in no doubt about the crucial role the arts and culture has to play in transitioning to a zero carbon, better future.