This research project was prompted by my experience as a city functionary for cultural policy with the Municipality of Groningen. Being the largest city in the northern part of the Netherlands the city has known an extended history of cultural production and consumption of various art forms, not in the least the performing arts. Since 1988, the city has developed a cultural-policy cycle in which the cultural sector in the city is evaluated integrally once every four years. In theory, the subsidies for cultural institutions are granted for a four-year period, allowing scope for long-term planning by the institutions. Once every four years, the city government can re-evaluate both the objectives of their cultural policy and the performance of the institutions themselves, and subsequently decide to continue or discontinue a particular subsidy. This presupposes an efficient method of evaluating the contribution of the cultural institutions to city objectives. This type of approach is of even greater importance in view of the fact that the policy documents of the city have shown a broadening of the city’s cultural-policy objectives. In 1988, artistic quality was the central feature of the subsidy evaluations. In later years, the contribution to economic development of the city, the city image, and preventing or alleviating social exclusion have become explicit aims of the cultural policy.

In theory, cultural institutions should adapt to the changes in policy objectives. In practice, the institutions – and who can blame them for that – are primarily concerned with their own continuity and are only sporadically willing to support new objectives by adopting new activities which are then added to the existing repertoire of cultural activities in the city. The question concerning the way in which the ‘regular’ activities of cultural institutions contribute to policy goals that are frequently regarded as being external to the cultural sector itself is rarely answered. And where this type of claim is made, it usually comes in imprecise terms, which make it too elusive for thorough policy evaluation. The argument usually takes the following form: artistic activities contribute to the development of individuals in the city, therefore if there are artistic activities, the city’s population will undergo development. The implicit assumption is that the higher the artistic quality of the activities, the greater the chance of development. Thus, cultural quality is once again made the central focus of cultural policy.

It is my opinion that cultural policy is not about generating as much cultural quality as possible. It is about the contribution that cultural activities in the city make to the city as a whole. Therefore we should have some cognizant account of how the arts contribute to a city’s development, or the development of its inhabitants. On the one hand I agree with those who argue that it is unfair to assign objectives to cultural institutions which they cannot possibly meet. On the other hand, if the defenders of autonomous artistic quality look
to the government to provide public funds to attain this quality, they should be prepared to offer a satisfactory explanation of why this is important to society.

This brings me to the second reason for setting up the research project. In my experience as an official for cultural policy, I have witnessed a tendency to objectify government policy. In recent years the relationship between government, professional institutions and citizens has been reinvented. The neo-liberal policies of smaller and efficient government have led to a situation where governmental bodies see themselves as agents who ‘buy’ certain services from professional institutions and distribute them to their citizens. These citizens demand value for money. Although the privatization of the provision of services may have been successful in many cases, such as in the telecommunications industry, it remains to be seen whether or not this development has been salutary within the cultural sector. Obviously, the freedom of private initiatives in implementing cultural policies is crucial, as is their autonomous development. However, these developments also have led to an orientation of policy towards a certain accountability with respect to the effects that have been generated. For the cultural policy, this means that referring to the artistic quality that has been generated (and evaluated by specialists in independent advisory boards) is no longer enough. An account of the societal effects this quality has given (or will give) rise to is also needed.

In Dutch city politics, this tendency has been reinforced by the introduction of duality in local administration. Up to 2002, the board of mayor and alderman was part of the city council and voted on its own proposals to the city council. Since 2002 this has no longer been the case, and the board of mayor and aldermen has received greater executive responsibilities while the controlling instruments of the city council have been strengthened, thus promoting political debate on the evaluation of policies. Therefore the political importance of policy evaluation has dramatically increased. In several cases, including the city of Groningen, these changes have led to a reorganization of the city administrative bodies, with the introduction of specific departments for producing policy evaluation in order to cater efficiently to the politician’s need for data on performance. The implicit assumption in staffing such departments is that youth policy or policies directed towards the elderly can be evaluated in the same way, as long as the indicators for evaluation have been chosen. This may well be the case, but it is my view that cultural-policy evaluation implies a thorough knowledge of the effects of cultural quality in and on society. Because of the fact that, in financial terms, cultural policy is usually a very small department when compared to education and health policy, this specific knowledge is not available in such dedicated policy-evaluation departments. This means that, in the future, impossible standards for cultural policy are likely to be generated, which may harm the cultural sector. Instead of making clear what the cultural sector’s contribution to a city actually is, these departments may only indicate that the sector is constantly falling short of policy expectations. This may weaken the political support for cultural activities in the long run.
This is why I seized the opportunity to participate in a research project which was offered at the Department for Arts, Culture and Media Studies of the University of Groningen. Professor Hans van Maanen of the department kindly invited me to participate in a group of Ph.D. students convening regularly to discuss their research projects. He also introduced me to the Project on European Theatre Systems (STEP) which started in 2005 with the aim of comparing theatre systems in smaller European countries. The central theme of the project is the assumption that the diversity in European theatre systems also shows a diversity in the societal outcomes of these systems throughout Europe, thus generating very different positions for the theatre in European countries. This being the case, instruments need to be developed within STEP to describe theatre systems for the purpose of comparing them. But instruments to describe the outcomes of the theatre systems are also needed. My research project is a contribution to this last issue. Because of the fact that this research is part of STEP, this book has been written in English. Although the research primarily focuses on the Dutch policy system, I hope that this book will provide researchers, officials and managers within cultural institutions in other countries with helpful concepts and tools for dealing with these issues.

Writing a Ph.D. thesis has proven to be a challenging endeavour in which I have experienced that pushing forward in my investigations – as any Ph.D. candidate will have experienced – meant writing more and more about less and less. Empirically testing the model for evaluating cultural policy turned out to be unfeasible in this project. Further studies will be burdened with this task. None the less, I hope to have been able to make a valuable contribution to the field of cultural policy. It is a contribution which would not have been possible without the help of a number of people. First of all I thank my supervisor, Professor Hans van Maanen for his invitation to participate in his department’s Ph.D. project and for his comments on the drafts of this book. These comments and his general stimulation have made this endeavour challenging and invigorating right up to the end. I should also thank Dr Miranda Boorsma who acted as co-supervisor during the largest part of the research. I have greatly benefited from her expertise in cultural economics and arts marketing. The professional contributions as well as the friendship of these two supervisors have helped bring this work to fruition. From the circle of Ph.D. candidates I am greatly indebted to Marlieke Wilders whose research subject touched mine so consummately. Collaborating with her and Kim Joostens brought continual inspiration. Their comments have steered me in many right directions. I should also express my gratitude towards the students in my Arts Policy course who provided the first empirical material for Chapter 11 of this book. From the circle of colleagues in public administration I should mention the stimulation offered by Tineke Bennema and Henk Hofstra who were so kind as to allow me time to do this research, and who also discussed the topics of various chapters at great length. Furthermore, I thank Erik Akkermans who was so kind as to read the drafts of this manuscript and comment on them. His assertion of the topicality of this research project was important to keep going.
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DUTCH MUNICIPAL CULTURAL POLICY
IN THE BRAVE NEW WORLD OF
EVIDENCE-BASED POLICY