

2024

Preliminary Study on
Malmö's Nightlife and
a Vision for the Future
of a Creative City

2024

This document was produced by VibeLab and Transversal Project on behalf of the City of Malmö City Executive Office Department of Business and External Relations.

VibeLab is a data-driven research, consultancy and advocacy agency dedicated to supporting creatives and preserving nighttime culture. With over ten years of experience, VibeLab works with local institutions and governments to develop strategies to effectively navigate and support the nightlife industry. We specialise in making complex data clear. VibeLab's research and consultancy helps identify growth opportunities and connects individuals, businesses, governments and institutions, to boost creativity and local economies. We are passionate about the transformative power that nightlife culture and creative communities have on urban areas. Our strength lies in our connections: we bridge the gap between government authorities, nightlife creatives and local communities. VibeLab creates change with sustainable solutions, backed by data to make cities thrive at night.

Transversal Project is a Sweden-based, Europe-active cultural strategy and production agency. We work across national borders and social disciplines to help cities, creators and enterprises create international, culture-driven development projects, and find the money to do them. Transversal Project is the manager, strategist, initiator or manages the transdisciplinary artistic platform Borderline Offensive, connecting artists exploring humorous approaches to discuss sad and hard topics; it is a strategic advisor to European Creative Rooftop Network; it runs the SUNPLUGGED network of non-electric light art festivals, and one of the artistic residency programmes for performing arts creators within Rawabet, a professional support and development programme for creators of non-European origin.

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Contents

Opening Statements (Svenska).....	5
Opening Statements (English).....	7
Executive Summary	9
City Profile.....	12
Methodology	15
Nighttime Governance.....	18
Introduction to Findings.....	21
What Malmö Already Has.....	24
Space	28
Funding.....	31
Capacity Building.....	33
Vision on Nightlife Culture and Next Steps	36
References.....	43
Special Thanks	44
Project Team	45

Opening Statements

(Svenska)

Malmö's nattliv är hjärtat i vår stad. En kraft som ger liv åt vårt kreativa ekosystem och stärker våra sociala band. Nattlivet är länken mellan kultur och näringsliv, konst och musik, det ideella och det kommersiella. Men framförallt mellan människor. Nattlivet har gjort Malmö attraktivt och det har skapat trygga och inspirerande mötesplatser. Det har lockat människor att flytta hit och företag och kulturella verksamheter att etablera sig här. Genom att ta till var den resurs som nattlivet är skapar vi en levande stad och öppnar dörrarna för unika möjligheter för en hållbar tillväxt framåt.

Jag hoppas att denna förstudie ska vara ett inspirerande första steg för att väcka tankar om hur nattlivet kan främja Malmö's fortsatta tillväxt och samtidigt skapa en trygg och hållbar stad. Låt den inspirera till att betrakta nattlivet lite mindre som bara en tillsynsfråga och mycket mer som en resurs i arbetet för en attraktiv, trygg och hållbar stad. Det arbetet är gemensamt och kan bara göras tillsammans.

Jag vill också passa på och rikta ett stort tack till alla som har delat med sig av sin tid, kunskap och erfarenheter för att möjliggöra denna förstudie. Tack till alla som deltagit i fokusgrupp, intervjuer och panel. Och tack till VibeLab som bidragit med stort engagemang och sina internationella perspektiv.

Låt oss fortsätta att utforska, stödja och stärka Malmö's nattliv för att göra Malmö till en attraktiv, trygg och hållbar stad som människor vill flytta till, mötas i och bo kvar i tillsammans.

Harald Stjerna, Projektledare, Malmö stad

Det viktiga att förstå är att Malmö idag är en stad som bygger på kreativa näringar. Stockholm och Göteborg har en massa annat, men i Malmö är de kreativa näringarna pulsådern, stadens starka livsnerv.

Magnus Thure Nilsson, CEO Media Evolution

Genom ett levande nattliv skapas sammanhang och trygghet för alla. Utan tillgängliga platser för nya aktörer går energin och pulsen som Malmö är känt för förlorad. Vi måste värna om det som redan finns - det finns vibes i Malmö!

Andrea Correa, General manager Malmö Pride och tidigare Plan B

En levande stad är nödvändigt för att behålla och attrahera en ung befolkning. Malmös nattliv är just nu i ett tufft läge och vi har tappat ett stort antal av våra centrala nattklubbar de senaste åren. Om detta hade varit en annan bransch hade det antagligen tillsatts en kriskommission. Malmös klubbscen var grogrunden som Big Slap växte ur. Det behövs nu en tydlig vision från stadens sida för att uppmuntra unga kreatörer som vill göra sina första arrangemang och som kan bli framtidens festivalarrangörer.

Ali Eftekhari, grundare Big Slap festival

Opening Statements

(English)

Malmö's nightlife is the heart of our city. Nightlife is a force that breathes life into our creative ecosystem and strengthens our social ties. Nightlife is the link between culture, business, art, music, the grassroots and the commercial—and above all, between people. Nightlife has not only made Malmö attractive by fostering safe and inspiring meeting places for different communities, but is a key reason why businesses and cultural actors call Malmö home. By utilising the resource that nightlife is, we not only create a vibrant city, but also open the doors to unique opportunities for sustainable growth in the future.

I hope that this study serves as an inspiring first step in sparking conversations on how nightlife can promote Malmö's continued growth, while creating a safer and more sustainable city. Let it inspire us to consider nightlife less as a nuisance and more as a vehicle towards an attractive, safe and sustainable city. This groundwork is our collective responsibility, and can only be done together.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank everyone who has shared their time, insights and experiences to make this study possible. Thank you to everyone who participated in focus groups, interviews and panels. And thanks to VibeLab for contributing with great commitment and their global perspectives.

Let's continue to explore, support and strengthen Malmö's nightlife. This will surely lead to an attractive, safe and sustainable city that people want to move to, meet in and stay in together.

Harald Stjerna, Project Manager, City of Malmö

The important thing to understand is that Malmö today is a city built on the cultural and creative industries. Stockholm and Gothenburg have a lot of other things, however in Malmö, the creative industries are the arteries, the strong lifeblood of the city.

Magnus Thure Nilsson, CEO Media Evolution

A vibrant nightlife creates a sense of belonging and security for everyone. Without accessible places for new actors, the energy and pulse that Malmö is known for is lost. We must protect what already exists—there are vibes in Malmö!

Andrea Correa, General Manager Malmö Pride, formerly at Plan B

A vibrant city is necessary to retain and attract young people. Malmö's nightlife is currently in a tough situation, and we have lost a large number of our central nightclubs in recent years. If this had been any other industry, a crisis commission would probably have been set up. Malmö's club scenes were the breeding ground from which Big Slap grew. A clear vision is now needed from the city to encourage young creators who want to make their first events and who can become the festival organisers of the future.

Ali Eftekhari, founder of Big Slap Festival

Executive Summary



The following report details the results of an exploratory preliminary research study into the nightlife and creative ecosystem of Malmö, commissioned by the City of Malmö City Executive Office Department of Business and External Relations.

The research was conducted by VibeLab in close collaboration with many of Malmö's established and emerging nightlife actors alike. VibeLab is a data-driven research, consultancy and advocacy agency dedicated to supporting creatives and preserving nighttime culture. This report is a pioneering new step by the city to conduct research into Malmö's nightlife and creative and cultural industries.

The report begins with a profile of the city, including key demographic characteristics and an overview on its nightlife and creative and cultural industries. Next is a brief explanation of the methodology, consisting primarily of a focus group of representatives of Malmö's cultural, artistic and nightlife scenes and selected city officials. Following this is an explanation of nighttime governance and its application and significance for Malmö. The report then explores the key findings related to the value, challenges and future aspirations of nightlife in the city:

- The *value* of Malmö's nightlife encompasses social, cultural, artistic and economic dimensions. Participants take clear pride in their city, its diversity and how its working class origins contribute to its uniquely grassroots and creative nightlife. The city remains for the time being an affordable place for artists and operators alike.
- Participants identify that all these essential elements that make Malmö's nightlife so unique are under *acute threat*. It is becoming increasingly difficult for Malmö's nightlife actors to live, work and create in the city. If nothing is done to reverse these trends, the vibrancy and quality of Malmö's nightlife will continue to decline as has already begun in recent years.
- Participants highlighted three important *themes* relevant to nightlife in Malmö today, why they are important and what challenges they face:

- *Space* for nightlife is essential. Without safe, accessible and affordable venues, nightlife actors cannot create. Each venue plays an important role in the creative ecosystem and more should be done to protect those under threat. Rather than increasing safety, city efforts to close down underground venues and parties have led to a creative 'brain drain' and will decrease the attractiveness of the city for younger people. The financial risks involved in operating nightlife venues make it difficult for operators to platform grassroots talent and provide safe spaces for minoritised¹ groups.
- *Funding* is viewed as an integral support for the nightlife industry. However, knowledge of funding opportunities is limited and younger participants find it more difficult to access. Micro-grants for early career nightlife producers were a welcome proposal. Participants want nightlife to be considered in cultural planning and funding. Permitting processes and other requirements to open new, legal venues need to be simplified and supported by the city.
- *Capacity building* through skills sharing and better collaboration between the nightlife industry and the city are viewed with great potential. One aspect of this would be a shift of focus by the city away from penalising illegalised parties and venues and instead working with these nightlife producers. Participants already began sharing knowledge and ideas with each other and offering assistance outside of the focus group. A focus on building relationships and expertise will also help to decrease risks associated with operating in nightlife. Meaningful engagement by the city of its nightlife communities leads to more trust and understanding.

1. The term 'minoritised', used to refer to racial and ethnic minority communities, better recognises that individuals from these communities have been minoritised through social processes and power relations rather than simply reducing them to a statistical measure: <https://www.lawsociety.org.uk/topics/ethnic-minority-lawyers/a-guide-to-race-and-ethnicity-terminology-and-language>

The report concludes with a vision for nightlife in Malmö and a targeted set of next steps on a new course of action for the city and its nightlife—the communities, nightlife goers, operators, artists, promoters and other creatives who call Malmö home. Each next step is illustrated by a good practice example from other cities that have been doing more for their nightlife and creative and cultural industries. They are summarised as follows:

Space

- Begin searching for potential locations for temporary and long term nightlife spaces to service as talent incubators for future creators of nightlife and creative culture. This can be done using an available space assessment of publicly-owned and privately-owned land in the city.
- Invest in training programmes for operators and nightlife goers targeted to combat exclusion, discrimination and violence in nightlife spaces. This will lead to safer and more inclusive nightlife experiences. It will also build capacity from within the nightlife industry itself.

Funding

- Kickstart a micro-grants funding programme for emerging artists and collectives to invest in the creation of new nightlife ventures. Ensure that grants are accessible to the most minoritised communities in Malmö and provide application support.
- Kickstart a soundproofing funding programme for existing nightlife and live music venues in close proximity to residential areas. This funding is used for structural renovations to prevent external noise leakage and reduce conflicts with neighbours.

Capacity Building

- Create an initial steering committee composed of city departments relevant to nightlife including cultural development and funding, licensing and zoning, police, fire, public safety, commerce, etc. This body can serve as a centralised and primary liaison between the city and nightlife. It can coordinate all activities related to nightlife and provide visionary guidance.

- *Recommendation for the nightlife industry:* Nightlife actors in Malmö can also self-organise. This steering committee, council or similar body can be composed of representatives from all corners of nightlife. It can speak for the interests of the industry and its communities and be the main point of communication with the city.
- All public and private nightlife-related bodies can meaningfully and regularly engage with each other, as well as neighbourhood councils and real estate. They must work collectively towards shared goals, in order to make creative, sustainable and attractive nightlife not only possible, but guaranteed.

This report comes at a critical juncture. As Malmö plans for its future, it must not forget its nightlife. This venture should rely on data-driven actions and direct and inspired collaborations between the city and its creative and nightlife ecosystem.



Photo: Gianluca La Bruna

City Profile

12

Malmö is a dynamic cultural hub in Sweden with a well known history of grassroots nightlife. This cosmopolitan, midsize city is Sweden's third largest, and is distinguished by its notable demographic diversity and its proximity to other cultural hubs like Copenhagen. Malmö's economy is healthy and diversifying, with strengths in technology, sustainability, media and the arts industries. It offers cultural and creative industries clusters such as Media

Evolution City². Malmö's economic growth is led by the knowledge and technology sectors. Despite this growth, social and employment exclusion persists in the city and more socio-economic inclusion is needed³.

Malmö is the most diverse city in Sweden. Key figures from 2022⁴ relevant to nightlife and the creative ecosystem include:



Malmö is the fastest growing city in Sweden, with the population set to reach over 400,000 inhabitants in the next 10 years.

<35

Roughly half of Malmö's population is under 35
(29% are between ages 25-34).



The foreign-born population of Malmö comes from 186 different countries of origin (majority SWANA⁵ region and southeastern Europe).



One-third of Malmö's population were born outside of Sweden.

20-25

The largest age segment of in-migration to Malmö is 20-25.

5. SWANA is an umbrella term to describe the South West Asian and North African region. It replaces colonial and Eurocentric terms including Middle East, Near East and Arab or Islamic World: <https://swanaalliance.com/about>

Malmö is a cultural and economic centre in the Skåne county with wide ranging nightlife options for all audiences. A night out can take you from an intimate restobar, to a DIY heavy metal venue, to a state-funded cultural centre, a nightclub or a grassroots rave. Many of Malmö's most popular nightlife spaces are independently owned. This stands in contrast to other Swedish cities like Stockholm, where nightlife spaces are largely owned by corporate hospitality groups⁶. Notable venues include Inkonst⁷, Plan B⁸, Moreskan⁹, Grand¹⁰ and Etage¹¹. Popular nightlife hotspots include Lilla Torg and Möllevångstorget. In the summer, festivals including Backyard Sessions¹², Big Slap¹³, South Ocean Festival¹⁴ and NGBG¹⁵ draw crowds ranging from young revellers to families. Since 2014, police and city intervention in nightlife has led to an ongoing stream of venue closures that persists today. Despite this and further disruption due to the Covid-19 pandemic, Malmö's nightlife continues to thrive and evolve.

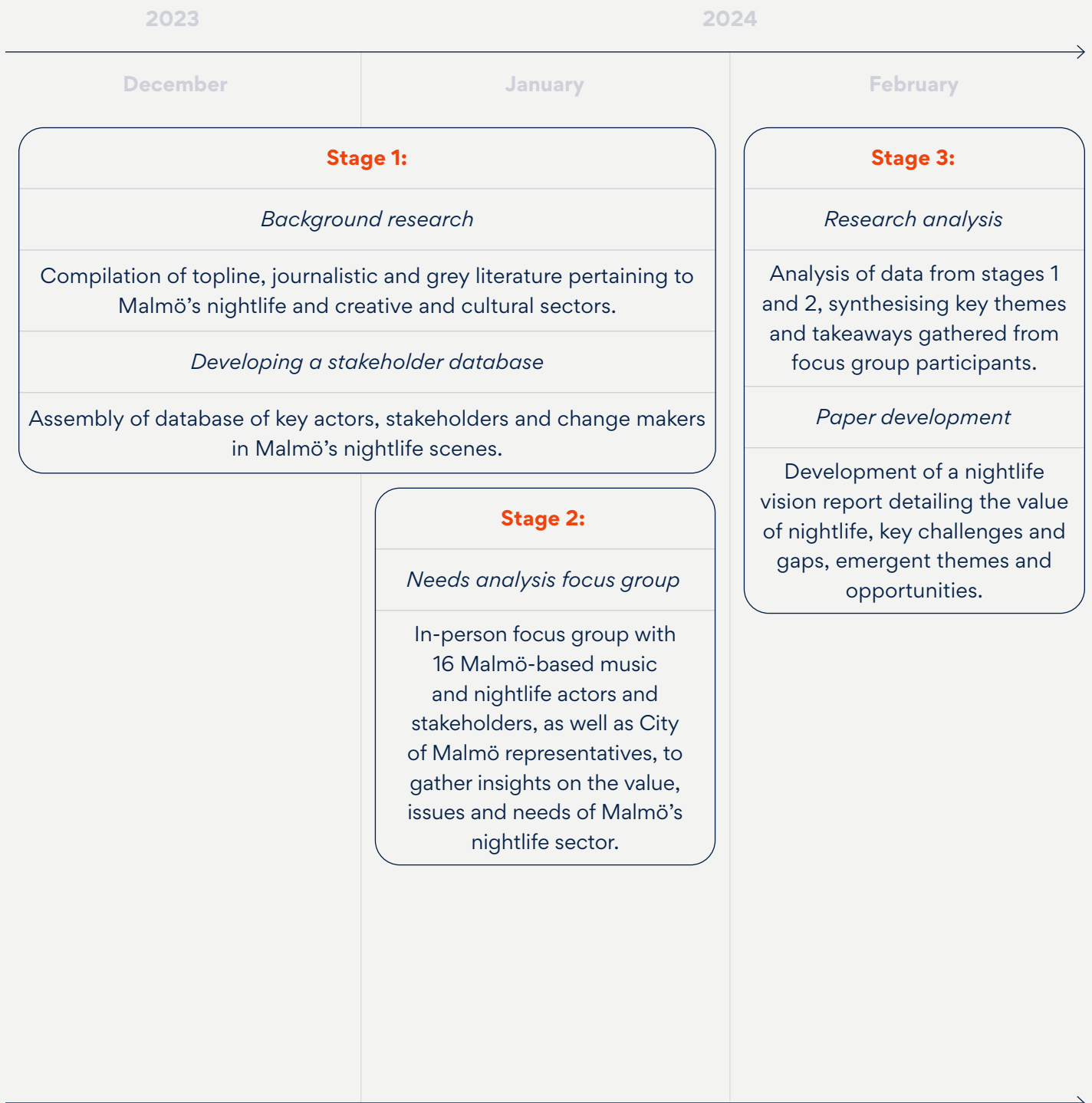


Photo: Gianluca La Bruna

Methodology

15

This report was produced using a combination of qualitative research methods. Such a research approach yields an informed understanding of Malmö’s nightlife landscape, its challenges and aspirations. The below timeline details each step of the three-stage process.



The in-person needs analysis focus group (conducted in English) consisted of 16 participants, and aimed to generate community-driven insights into Malmö's nightlife. By engaging with people from all areas of the nightlife industry and creative ecosystem, as well as city officials, the focus group sought to understand what is already working well, as well as what can and should be done for the future.

Focus group participants included venue owners and operators, grassroots event organisers, musicians, music label managers, DJs, community organisers, club collectives, independent radio hosts, cultural journalists, promoters and bookers, as well as representatives from various departments within the City of Malmö. The make-up of the group strived to best represent Malmö's non-commercial nightlife. While commercial nightlife actors and nightlife districts including Lilla torg certainly are an important part of Malmö's nightlife, the aim of this study was to engage those nightlife operators who the City of Malmö may not already interact with. The intent of the focus group was to understand the value and needs of Malmö's grassroots and underground nightlife, those creative entrepreneurs in need of recognition and support for their contributions to the character and attractiveness of the city. For these reasons, representatives from more established nightlife and cultural institutions such as Malmö Opera, Skånes Dansteater, Slagthuset, Etagegruppen and Nöjsteartern were not included. Nonetheless, participants varied in age, background, experience, ethnicity and sexual and gender identities.



Nighttime Governance

18

In many cities, traditional conceptions of city governance and regulation of the urban night have focused on mechanisms of control, surveillance and disciplinary enforcement. Rather than understanding nightlife as an asset, these approaches have devalued nightlife to a nuisance, with little recognition of its cultural, social, political and economic contributions and little attention paid to its development¹⁶.

However, since the early 2000s, new nighttime governance models have emerged that recognise and proactively manage the nighttime economy (NTE)¹⁷. This shift was spearheaded by early nightlife advocacy associations and representatives such as the Berlin Clubcommission¹⁸ and Amsterdam's first 'night mayor'¹⁹. Since 2015, nighttime governance models and 'night mayors' have increased to over 100 cities in Europe, North America and elsewhere. Notable major cities include New York, London, Paris, Sydney and Tokyo. Many mid-sized and smaller cities similar to Malmö already boast some form of nighttime governance—examples include Vilnius, Bristol and Detroit. Evidently, nighttime governance is valuable for any city regardless of size or global positioning. This network will only continue to grow, with each new city contributing more experience, knowledge and good practices.

As this movement has spread, nightlife industry actors and urban governments in these and more cities have awoken to the benefits that nightlife brings. They understand the fragility of the nightlife industry and its interconnectedness to the overall urban economy and infrastructure. Although the relationship between nightlife and city residents requires care and compromise, public opinion on nightlife has shifted. It is no longer seen solely in terms of criminality and unhealthy habits. It is viewed as a creative artform, a vital social function, a place for inclusivity and a legitimate career path. Especially cities that have distinctive nightlife, such as Malmö, risk losing this social, cultural and economic asset. By doing more for nightlife, cities with nighttime governance ensure a more sustainable future, continued cultural attractiveness and opportunities for economic and tourism growth.

These contemporary models rely on complex networks and multilayered collaboration of public and private actors. Nighttime governance 'offices' can be located inside or outside of government²⁰. It is important to note that 'night mayors' and other nighttime governance officials are not publicly elected and that nighttime policy and decision making power rests with other relevant municipal departments²¹.

Nighttime governance constellations can take a variety of forms and can have varying levels of authority, influence and resources. Nighttime governance 'offices' can be located at the state and municipal levels, as is respectively the case in New South Wales (Sydney)²² and New York City²³. These models tend to have more secure funding but may be more siloed within departments. Other models include non-governmental nightlife advocacy associations such as MTL 24/24²⁴ in Montréal and N8W8²⁵ in Rotterdam. These models provide more direct representation of the industry, by the industry. However, they may have less access to funding and resources and may run on a voluntary or semi-voluntary basis. No one model is inherently better than another. Which models are appropriate in any given city depends on a number of contextual factors and may shift, react and evolve over time.

Nighttime governance is often guided by a framework, vision or strategy. These development toolkits represent a shift away from governance through penalisation and control. Key city entities involved include zoning and licensing, arts and culture, public health and police. Private entities include nighttime industry advocacy associations, business coalitions and neighbourhood groups. The below table summarises nighttime governance structures and the economic impact of the NTE from a section of global cities.

17. The nighttime economy, or NTE, connotes all the activities, businesses and workers operating at night: nightlife, hospitality and leisure as well as night shift workers, late-night transportation, retail and more: <https://www.creative-footprint.org/>

Examples of contemporary nighttime governance models and the economic impact of the NTE

	Nighttime governance structure	Economic impact
Montréal, Canada	MTL 24/24 Night Council (outside of local government)	\$2.26 billion (CAD) in 2019 ²⁶
London, United Kingdom	Greater London Authority (inside of local government)	£26.3 billion (GDP) in 2017 ²⁷
New York City, United States	Office of Nightlife (inside of local government)	\$35.1 billion (USD) in 2016 ²⁸

Nighttime governance covers an interlinked field of urban planning areas, each contributing collectively to a governance ecosystem. This research has revealed a number of these links as most urgent for nightlife in Malmö:

- Attracting and developing creative talent
- Tourism and the creative industries
- Placemaking and city planning
- Diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI)
- Safety, awareness and safe(r) spaces
- Community and neighbourhood cohesion
- Arts and business grants and funding

Introduction to Findings

21

Before delving into the findings, it is important to first understand the social, cultural, artistic and economic contributions nightlife makes to the city. Nightlife creates spaces for community to form and cultivates the creative and artistic talent that underpins a city's distinctive cultural identity. It is an oft-overlooked driver of local creative economies that provides jobs and opportunities for career development. The essential place of nightlife in Malmö's creative and cultural industries was made clear and obvious by focus group participants. Their voices collectively cheered the contributions that nightlife makes to the social, artistic and economic attractiveness of the city.

This section is structured according to the natural course of conversation in the focus group, guided by the open-ended questions included in the methodology. First is a discussion of 'what Malmö already has' in terms of the value of its nightlife and nightlife communities. Following that is a summary of the topline themes and challenges of operating in nightlife in Malmö. These challenges are interlinked and mutually-reinforcing. Any actions to remedy these challenges must be holistic.

Although participants expressed frustration with a number of barriers to entry and other obstacles, the dialogue between folks in the room from all corners of the industry and City of Malmö representatives was collaborative and productive. Rather than expressing a sense of defeat, discussions were solution-oriented. Participants feel that nightlife in Malmö is under immediate threat. They expressed that now is the moment to implement plans to preserve and protect it.



What Malmö Already Has

24

When prompted to share visions for the future of nightlife in Malmö and its various creative communities, a number of focus group participants brought the discussion back to the present. One shared sentiment was the necessity to recognise and care for what is already here, what already makes the city dynamic and a diverse nightlife possible. Participants agreed that this is something special about Malmö's nightlife, and that this value should be recognised, celebrated and preserved. They felt that any development efforts should start with a consideration of Malmö today.

People and talent

Participants highlighted that the identity of Malmö's nightlife is people-centred. They spoke in terms of the social and cultural benefits of nightlife. For them, nightlife is about connection and exchange. As one participant put it:

“Malmö's nightlife is important because of people and in the end it is for the people, especially when we look at the grassroots movement and the underground. My focus would be on the people that give this energy and the people that receive this energy by coming to party.”

Participants spoke proudly about the creative community and wealth of artistic talent of Malmö and the niche that it occupies. They felt that Malmö offers creatives a different way to live and develop their talents than other cities in the region and beyond. When asked to think about how to attract new and creative residents, participants redirected the discussion towards the importance of talent retention as well. According to one participant:

“I feel like we need to keep the creative people in Malmö, not going to Gothenburg or Stockholm, Copenhagen or London. And if you don't get the opportunity to do stuff, or be able to try stuff, those people will quickly disappear. I think it's important for the industry, and that's a big part of the importance of nightlife.”

Participants shared how the 2014 police and city crackdown on nightlife is still discouraging younger, innovative and would-be promoters and organisers from putting on nightlife events. If the risks remain high, Malmö stands to lose the next generation of grassroots nightlife creators and talent, as well as nightlife goers:

“There was so much going on, many generations of new promoters. But in 2014, the police cracked down hard on all the underground clubs. All the promoters got afraid, the police also cracked down hard on the crowd. We are lacking one or two generations because of this.”

Grassroots and DIY nightlife culture

According to participants, the overwhelming characteristic that sets Malmö's nightlife apart is its grassroots, underground and DIY spaces and communities:

“You always have to have the philosophy of if you're going to do something, you have to do it yourself. If you're going to think of how you want things to develop, you need to think that it's going to be from the people, for the people.”

One participant traced the origins of this scene back decades ago and many spoke about their formative experiences of growing up as teenagers and younger adults in Malmö's alternative and often illegalised nightlife spaces. One participant shared the following:

“I want to highlight the importance of underground club raves. We have had a flourishing scene for decades. People are still organising underground clubs. We wouldn't really have a nightlife if it wasn't for that. We have to keep in mind that this underground movement is very, very important.”

Another wanted the city to understand that, as opposed to the more mainstream nightlife of Stockholm or Copenhagen, Malmö's alternative reputation makes the city attractive for artists and nightlife goers alike:

“I sometimes get this feeling that the city and the big corporations in the city don't really see the correlation between the grassroots movements and the underground scene and the actual attractiveness of the city.”

Rather than giving the city's nightlife a reputation centred around illegality, participants know that the freedom of informal and often illegalised nightlife has contributed to Malmö as a creative and inventive city. Grassroots nightlife organises itself from the bottom up and participants wish for this approach to be preserved in nightlife development.

Affordability

Multiple participants expressed the advantage that Malmö is still a relatively affordable city to live in, especially in comparison to other Swedish cities²⁹ and nearby Copenhagen. Operators and others involved in the nightlife and creative economy expressed that not only is Malmö a comparatively affordable city to live; it is also a relatively affordable place for independent businesses:

“It’s still kind of cheap to do things. The rent is pretty low. It’s still affordable. From our perspective, restaurant owners, we can still do a lot. A lot of restaurants are owned by people who run them, not by big companies. It’s independent, everyone doing what they like. It is still but we’ll see.”

As reflected above, a number of participants expressed the concern that in the near future, the city will become less affordable to live and operate an independent business in. Some participants shared that Malmö’s nightlife has already become prohibitively expensive, especially for certain communities:

“The parties here, everything is expensive. Young people, they can’t afford it.”

All participants found consensus that preserving the affordability of Malmö in all dimensions, including safeguarding independently owned and operated venues, is important for a flourishing nightlife. This will also both retain and attract a diverse population of creative people.

Diversity

According to participants, social and ethnic diversity sets Malmö apart both regionally and nationally. As the most ethnically diverse city in Sweden³⁰, participants felt that Malmö has a unique position and advantage in the country. Minoritised participants feel a sense of pride and belonging, and all participants agreed that this diversity contributes to the social fabric of Malmö. It also contributes to the quality and range of its nightlife, with events catering to the many communities that call Malmö home:

“I want to live here because as a Black woman, I feel safe. And I feel important walking around here, it’s something empowering being Eritrean here.”

“What I think is important for the nightlife in Malmö is that we have such a diversity that we don’t have in other cities. I often feel that there’s no other room in this society where people from so many different backgrounds unite and come together if it’s not for the nightlife.”

Overall, participants communicated a clear sense of pride in Malmö and its nightlife, whether born and raised in the city or having moved there from other parts of Sweden, Scandinavia and beyond. Participants felt an urgent need to protect what makes Malmö, Malmö.

Space

28

Participants spoke passionately about the essential need for accessible, affordable and grassroots spaces in Malmö, as well as the struggles faced in maintaining that accessibility for community, artistic expression and experimentation. They made clear the important role that venues play in the nightlife ecosystem of Malmö and the consequences when they are lost:

“I think it’s important to keep in mind when places disappear, they disappear forever. So we also need to take care of what we already have. Because when they’re gone, they’re gone. And it takes years to build that kind of business up again.”

Participants resoundingly agreed on the need for more safe(r) nightlife spaces³¹. They explained the significance of these spaces and the role they play in empowering and creating community. A number of participants feel more safe in grassroots clubs and illegalised parties rather than in mainstream clubs with heavy security. In grassroots and illegalised safe(r) spaces, safety comes from nightlife goers’ collective care for each other and de-stigmatisation of substance abuse. In particular, minoritised participants expressed negative experiences with mainstream club security and the police. Although these spaces may currently be lacking in Malmö, their necessity was made clear. Voices in the room from minoritised groups expressed the following sentiments:

“What we’re talking about, you can’t really measure in money. We’re talking about values, meeting places, safe spaces. I do really think it’s a shame that the most queer city in Sweden doesn’t even have queer clubs.”

“If we don’t have a flourishing nightlife, we don’t have rooms where people can come together, and that creates a safer society and more bonding with the people that live here.”

“Our underground parties here in Malmö provide much better safe space than our legal ones. They take better consideration of the people. This is a crucial topic, what is safe space in nightlife and how do you provide it? Right now, the safer spaces are underground parties.”

Participants expressed that a thriving nightlife relies on the concentration of nightlife spaces in the city centre. They observe that more and more independent and small nightlife businesses are being priced out to the urban perimeter. According to one venue owner:

“I feel like we are being pushed out of the city, we want to be here in the middle of the city centre.”

The group aligned on the essential significance of independent, grassroots nightlife spaces, in particular for platforming early stage talent. These spaces are an essential part of the nightlife ecosystem because they provide space for emerging artists to develop skills and new audiences. However, they are generally less profitable and thus in need of special protection. Some venue owners and operators, as well as bookers, shared their difficulties in fulfilling this purpose:

31. Safe spaces are spaces where people who are marginalised or discriminated against can come together without being exposed to harassment. In these spaces, people who experience prejudice or difficulty in everyday life because of their identity should be able to move and socialise freely. However, it is almost impossible to guarantee absolute safety. That is why the term safe(r) space is more often used. Maintaining safe(r) space requires constant effort and reflection on power structures and processes. Clubs play an important role as safe(r) spaces for their communities: <https://awareness-akademie.de/glossary/?lang=en> For more on the history of safe(r) spaces in nightlife: <https://djmag.com/longreads/space-be-yourself-rise-safe-space-parties>

“As a business owner, taking that risk and booking that risky artist, you can’t even take that risk anymore because how are you going to pay the bills?”

“When I book the small artists, it takes a while. I give them the small room and I try to make it happen. We try, but it’s hard and you lose money. You’re just bleeding money every night. So it’s tough, a tough choice.”

Participants understood these challenges as interconnected and overlapping. The difficulties of running a venue and other nightlife businesses have led to the steady stream of closures and the mainstreaming of Malmö’s grassroots nightlife—where only commercial venues will remain. The loss of key grassroots spaces in recent years has meant that community has become increasingly harder to find. Participants would like to see the risks involved in running a nightlife business decrease, so that it is easier for new spaces to open. They expressed support and gratitude for one another’s work—as in the words of one participant to another venue owner:

“I have to give a shout out to you, thank you for existing. Thank you also for being the only place in Malmö open until 2:00 AM. Yours is the only place that I feel safe that late.”



Funding

31

Participants recognised and appreciated that the City of Malmö already provides quite some financial support for the nightlife industry. **However, some participants expressed that access to funding is both unequal and inconsistent.** A portion of participants represented independent venues and grassroots associations that already receive some level of cultural funding from the city. They were already knowledgeable of this funding and how to apply for it. They confirmed that their programming is partially or even fully dependent on it. As operations costs continue to rise, it is becoming increasingly difficult to provide grassroots programming. This is the reality despite the availability of this funding:

“We have party organisers that contact us, but they can’t afford to pay us for the use of our space. We try to make it work and help cover the cost, but if Live Nation calls, I need to take that booking so we can pay our staff and everything else.”

Participants see potential for more nightlife in the Cultural Sound Zone (Kulturjudzon)³² in the industrial Sofielund neighbourhood. This is the first such zone in Sweden, which is regarded globally as an innovative urban planning practice. In these zones, above-average noise from both industrial and cultural functions is permitted. The area is already home to businesses like Pågen bakery and cultural institutions like Plan B³³. It is now theoretically possible for would-be venue operators to open up new, legal nightlife spaces. However, participants shared that without further government funding, the prohibitive costs of permitting, licensing and renovating available privately-owned industrial spaces in the area make it virtually impossible to develop nightlife there. Others shared that real estate owners in the area are not willing to sell to would-be venue operators. As a possible solution, participants discussed working with the city to develop nightlife in publicly-owned spaces in the neighbourhood:

“Another challenge right now for collectives is access to space. We would like to start a conversation around the Cultural Sound Zone with the city. It is an interesting conversation to have, for access to space for arts, culture and nightlife.”

Participants also discussed the need for micro-grants for grassroots collectives, promoters and other emerging nightlife creators. This funding is especially important for younger people who do not own or operate permanent spaces or who cannot afford regular access to temporary spaces. Participants want the city government to better reach out to younger people and assist them with the application process. One City of Malmö representative offered personal assistance to young people in the room looking for funding to create parties. One member of a creative collective explained:

“It’s good to give out small amounts. We have a big cultural funding institution in this city. If you give 5,000 SEK, it makes a huge difference. We need to take greater responsibility and care of the culture we have. We are a city that is changing, and the city government needs to help with that change.”

Participants want the City of Malmö to understand the significance of nightlife for the culture, creativity and attractiveness of the city, and for this to be considered in planning and cultural funding. They also see the importance of increased funding to secure the future of nightlife in Malmö. Participants spoke about the necessity to communicate to the city government that nightlife is a valuable contributor to the culture of the city. According to one:

“We have to define to the city what are DJs, artists, composers, etc. What is culture? It’s important to talk to politicians about the actual artists, especially when it comes to funding.”

Capacity Building



One promising outcome of the focus group was the imagining of different ways that nightlife actors can support each other, and especially younger people entering the industry. Participants proposed a number of ideas, including skills sharing and collaboration amongst themselves, and how this can be facilitated by the city. They discussed the benefits of building rapport and developing collective strategies between nightlife, the City of Malmö and the police. Benefits of these processes include:

“There is something about empowerment here, giving access to opportunities. As party organisers, venue owners, it is this that we want to work on. I think that giving freedom and resources to youth, this is the way that we bring them out.

One participant representing an organisation specialising in establishing cultural centres in abandoned buildings and industrial areas throughout Europe volunteered their expertise as a potential solution to Malmö’s lack of nightlife spaces and know-how for up-and-coming nightlife creators:

“We are speaking about abandoned buildings, whether they’re owned by the city, whether they’re owned privately. We have gathered so much expertise as mediators with cities, for building capacity with young people.”

Participants debated the possibility that it is not solely a lack of spaces that is standing in the way of the next generation of nightlife producers from jump-starting their careers. They agreed that it may also have to do with a gap in skills, experience and knowledge of funding and other career development opportunities. One participant connected this topic back to the desire of the group to lower the risks and barriers to entry into the nightlife industry:

“We have venues in Malmö that do get permanent funding from the city because they provide space and technical infrastructure for independent or external producers and promoters. The terms and conditions need to be more favourable for them, so as to contain the knowledge in process so that it doesn’t get lost. Because if the stakes are too high at the entry point to making club nights, there is the risk of not nurturing this sort of ecosystem. That means that all of the knowledge that has been accumulated will get lost.”

For participants, building capacity also means building understanding and working together with the police and the City of Malmö. A number of participants identified 2014 as a difficult moment for Malmö’s nightlife, where police and other municipal departments (health, tax and revenue, fire, etc.) collectively joined forces to shut down underground raves and event organisers. This has resulted in apprehension to organise such events. However, participants expressed they are more than willing to work with the police and other municipal departments to move forward. One participant encapsulated succinctly:

“I think we need first to come together, to find what the solution is to communicate with the police, with the city, how we all work on something together as a project.”

Particularly underground, grassroots and minoritised participants felt that there is a lack of trust between their communities and the police. They believe more can be done to decrease fear and misunderstanding. Participants felt unjustly targeted and that they should be given more freedom to conduct their events. Rather than focusing on the illegality of these events under current legislation, participants want the city to create a licensing and permitting landscape where creating underground and grassroots events is both easier and safer.

The knowledge exchange facilitated by these participants is a first step towards the capacity building and unified approach to nightlife development needed for Malmö's creative ecosystem to evolve. There was an appetite for renewed and informed communication between the nightlife industry and City of Malmö to work together rather than against each other. Participants want the city to recognise that if they want to help and promote nightlife, they cannot at the same time penalise the underground and grassroots nightlife that sets Malmö apart.



Photo: Gianluca La Bruna

Vision on Nightlife Culture and Next Steps



This report has explored the many facets of Malmö's night culture and its creative economy.

Night culture refers to the social and creative experience after dark, generated by creatives, nighttime workers, nightlife goers and other stakeholders. Night culture anchors the NTE, which in turn contributes to the economic growth and development of a city. A healthy nightlife ecosystem benefits other NTE businesses, and vice versa. Where nightlife thrives, so too do other creative and cultural industries. Exciting and diverse night culture attracts new creative people to a city. Having a reputation for unique nightlife increases tourism potential and connects a city to global networks of other creative cities. Nightlife provides a wide field of employment opportunities and spaces for business development. It is undoubtedly an economic asset worthy of investment and development.

The social and cultural value of nightlife for a city is boundless. Night culture is transcendent: it facilitates the exchange of ideas, values and customs. It is a place for artistic experimentation and innovation where inspiration is easily found. Night culture provides shared space for socialising and joy, where friends gather, new friends are found and connections are made between diverse communities. It is inherently political. Night culture is an outlet and a place for freedom of expression, identity formation and collectivity. The origins of night culture in so many cities can be traced to the traditions, struggles and creativity of minoritised communities. It provides a playground for talent development in the creative and cultural industries. Any city that wishes to attract and retain creative talent must not neglect its night culture³⁴.

Participants in this study provided a rich understanding of Malmö's night culture, its distinctive character and its communities and spaces. According to them, nightlife in Malmö is undoubtedly grassroots and has been so for decades. It reflects the socio-economic and ethnic and cultural diversity of the city and offers a wide range of inclusive experiences for Malmö residents and visitors. Participants view Malmö's night culture as a creative ecosystem. They value Malmö's independent spaces as incubators of creative talent and spaces for the creation of community. Malmö's night culture is DIY: it is shaped by collectives and the underground.

Participants stressed the immediacy of many obstacles they face in operating and creating nightlife and contributing to the creative and cultural economy. Despite what the city's creative community has built, Malmö stands today at a critical juncture where much of what makes its nightlife distinct is in danger of disappearing. In order to prevent this, urgent changes are needed in the way that the City of Malmö governs the night.

This report has been guided by the key question: what are the strengths and challenges of Malmö's nightlife culture and what are the hopes for the future? The focus group was just the beginning of a conversation between the City of Malmö and its nightlife communities. If this initial group of nightlife actors and public officials are any indication, there is a clear appetite to work collaboratively on how to best support, develop and innovate nightlife and the creative ecosystem in Malmö. A unified approach to nighttime governance is essential, where efforts towards rejuvenation and development are not hindered by efforts to close venues and otherwise stunt nightlife. The City of Malmö and its nightlife communities must no longer work in opposition to each other.

Next Steps

The following next steps serve as springboards for bold and timely action. They are clustered according to the themes explored earlier in the report and each recommendation is illustrated by examples of good practice.

Space

Conduct an available space assessment of both publicly-owned and privately-owned land to identify possible locations for nightlife (temporary or permanent). These spaces serve as incubators for future creative talent and nightlife culture.

Good practice: The City of Amsterdam provides temporary access to spaces that are slated for redevelopment to be used for nightlife. Up-and-coming nightlife producers can use these spaces to experiment and create while they would otherwise remain empty. The city also provides consultations for potential recipients³⁵.

Invest in diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI), awareness, harm reduction and other safe(r) space training programmes. This combats exclusion, discrimination and violence by educating nightlife workers, security personnel and nightlife goers in legal venues on how to create inclusive and safe nightlife for all—especially for minoritised communities.

Good practice: The Awareness Akademie, an initiative of the Berlin Clubcommission, provides workshops, trainings and other resources to nightlife actors on the full range of safe(r) space practices in club culture³⁶.

Funding

Create a micro-grants funding programme for individuals and collectives in artistic and creative fields related to nightlife culture. The positive impacts of these micro-grants are not limited to nightlife. They also contribute to development of the broader creative industries. Increase grant literacy by providing support and resources to first-time early-stage applicants. Grants should be awarded with social cohesion and inclusivity as top priorities.

Good practice: The New South Wales, Australia state government awards small projects grants of up to 5,000 AUD (equivalent to 34,000 SEK) to help fund professional development opportunities for arts and cultural workers as well as one-on-one grant application support services^{37 38}.

Create a funding programme for soundproofing of nightlife and live music venues. These funds are reserved for renovations and other structural improvements to reduce noise emanating from these spaces into surrounding residential areas. Such measures reduce neighbourhood conflicts and noise complaints against nightlife spaces and increase quality of life for residents. Soundproofing funds have already proven successful in reducing conflict and safeguarding venues in Montréal³⁹, Sydney⁴⁰, Ireland⁴¹ and elsewhere.

Good practice: The Berlin Clubcommission Schallschutzfonds programme awards state government soundproofing funding to venues for various noise protection measures in neighbourhoods where nightlife already exists in close proximity to residences. To date, 23 venues have completed soundproofing projects using this funding⁴².

Capacity building

Create a centralised point within the City of Malmö that can serve as the primary liaison for nightlife, and is responsible for managing and coordinating government activities related to it. This can start as a regular steering committee composed of representatives from relevant city departments including cultural development and funding, licensing and zoning, police, fire, public safety, commerce etc. The mandate of this group is to carry out visionary goals for nightlife in the city, including easing the process of opening new venues and moving away from penalisation towards legalisation of illegalised nightlife. This group can ultimately grow into a dedicated nightlife office.

Case study: The New York City Office of Nightlife coordinates city services and programmes to support the growth, diversity, sustainability and quality of the city's nightlife industry⁴³.

Recommendation for the nightlife

industry: Nightlife actors can come together and self-organise to form an industry council, steering group or similar body. The purpose of this entity is to build industry solidarity and represent industry interests while working with the City of Malmö.

Case study: The MTL 24/24 Night Council (a non-profit organisation representing and advocating for the nightlife industry in Montréal) is a consultative body of citizen representatives with a mandate to serve as the intermediary between public decision makers and the nightlife industry⁴⁴.

These public and private nightlife coordination and representation bodies must engage in regular, structured and accountable collective action. They must also systematically and meaningfully engage with neighbourhood councils and real estate. The goals and aspirations of this vision can only be accomplished through sustained and systematised collaboration between the city, industry and other relevant partners. In this way, the topics raised in this report on the importance of nightlife and the need for urgent support from the City of Malmö will not fade from policy agendas.

Vision on Nightlife Culture

This exciting new path should be guided first and foremost by additional research and data. Further research should engage with a wider stakeholder group of nightlife and creative and cultural industry actors. Representatives from a growing list of municipal departments involved in nighttime governance should also be involved, including police and public transportation. Diversifying engagement channels will yield insights from the entire spectrum of nightlife and creative and cultural industry stakeholders and will forge new connections. Further research can also utilise analysis of spatial, economic and other urban datasets including licensing, permitting and other policy procedures. Contextualising nightlife data within a broader scope of urban research yields, richer, more valuable and more actionable data.

This preliminary study and vision offers a shift in the way that the City of Malmö embraces nightlife and recognises it as an integral pillar of the creative and cultural ecosystem. This report has communicated new and intriguing insights from the nightlife community itself. It is clear that the time is now to recognise and integrate nightlife into arts and culture, economic development and other policy and planning agendas. The targeted legislation, policies and other reforms needed to execute a vision for nightlife and the creative and cultural ecosystem will rely on data-driven research delving even deeper into the city's nightlife and creative communities. In this way, Malmö can evolve into an even more attractive, safe and sustainable creative city.



LOVE

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