

**NEIGHBORHOOD
as A GLOBAL ARENA**

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**Infrastructures
and Methodologies**

SELF-ORGANIZATION IN COMMUNITIES WHERE THE STATE HAS WITHDRAWN*

Marjetica Potrč

A Participatory Society

I am a strong advocate of participatory projects. They create places where people can organize and build communities, a process I call “social architecture.” They are laboratories where the residents of a place try out new ideas and skills, to reimagine the cities where they live. They are playgrounds where residents learn what it means to participate in governing and how such participation can be used. Again and again, in collaborations with local residents in different locations around the world, I have seen that people want to be involved in governing their own environments, as a surplus of their personal or community engagement; they want to be responsible for the place they inhabit. In a participatory project – an optimistic endeavor on the participants’ part – ideas and practices can grow

* This text is the abbreviated version. See full text at: <http://designfortheivingworld.com/self-organization-in-communities-where-the-state-has-withdrawn/>

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from a community garden to the surrounding neighborhood and then to the city, always with the intention of reaching the level of government. Here, however, this bottom-up process too often fails – at a certain point, it is co-opted by interests other than those of the residents'. In this sense, the government – the state – fails the citizens, generally because the relationship between state and citizen has already been broken. But is this relationship in fact necessary for these projects? Or conversely, can participatory projects help restore this broken relationship?

Today we can think of the participatory society in two ways. First, participatory projects provide communities with the opportunity to develop new ideas for the city they live in – a bottom-up strategy. Second – a view from the top down – the state proclaims that we are already living in a participatory society and that residents need to be more self-reliant as the welfare state is on the way out.¹ This recalls the “Big Society” political ideology developed in Britain during David Cameron’s first government, which envisioned the empowerment of local citizens in a sort of direct democracy while relying on social solidarity and the free market to step in where the state withdraws.

In any case, the withdrawal of the state is clearly happening. As the welfare state scales back in Europe and elsewhere, it is important to understand why societies with a broken relationship between residents and the state resist self-organization and how they can eventually self-organize, as I saw first hand in very different communities in Serbia and South Africa. My experience in such projects has shown me that the kind of self-organization that leads to the participation of citizens in the governance of their city, to a new social agreement, and eventually to a new citizenship and a new relationship with the state, is strongly tied to a physical space. Through the use of relational objects and performative actions as tools for self-organization and rituals of transition (e.g. naming) residents claim ownership of a particular space, which is then transformed into a place – their place. And this happens by means of a social agreement.

Here I will try to present my understanding of self-organization based on two recent participatory projects in which I was involved. I describe the process we engaged in and, importantly, the new vocabulary we developed in the realization of these projects, which are, after all, about “learning by doing.”

Two Projects: Savamala and Soweto

Over the past four years, I have worked on a number of participatory projects with my students in the Design for the Living World class at the University of Fine Arts/HFBK Hamburg.² Two of them in particular seem relevant here, as they show how local residents can overcome a broken relationship with the state by transforming derelict public spaces into a place for the community.

In the project *Savamala – A Place for Making* (2013), we worked with the residents of the Savamala neighborhood in Belgrade, Serbia, to organize a shared working space, Studio KM8, for use by local architects, artists, and artisans, and to turn a century-old derelict steamboat, called Župa, into a community space for sharing skills and knowledge.³ When we arrived in Savamala, we saw that public spaces were neglected and run-down buildings were not being maintained. Our project produced new public spaces that were organized and managed by the local community. Additionally, it led to the formation of a community association through which Savamala residents could preserve Studio KM8 and Župa as places for the neighborhood.

As part of *The Soweto Project* (2014), we co-developed with local residents a community-organized public space in the Soweto district of Johannesburg, South Africa; the residents named this space Ubuntu Park.⁴ Before the project began, this was a neglected plot of land in the midst of an otherwise lively neighborhood. Filthy and full of garbage, it stank in the summer heat and was dangerous in early morning hours, when women crossed through it on the way to work. It was basically a no man's land. Significantly, the trash in the space came from the residents themselves, who had been using it as a dumping ground for more than forty years. But when the community became involved in the project, the dumping ceased and the land is now being gradually transformed into a neighborhood park managed by the Ubuntu Park Committee, a group made up of local residents.

¹ See, for example, reports on the inaugural speech of the Dutch King Willem-Alexander in 2013, such as Harriet Arkell, "The welfare state of the 20th century is over," says new Dutch king in his inaugural address," *Daily Mail* website, 18 Sept. 2013, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2423751/Dutch-King-Willem-Alexander-declares-welfare-state-20th-century-over.html>, and Henry Farrell, "Is this the End of the Dutch Welfare State?" *Washington Monthly* website, 20 Sept. 2013, http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/ten-miles-square/2013/09/is_this_the_end_of_the_dutch_wo46972.php.

² In my class, students engage in participatory practice during long-term residencies. For information about our past projects, see our website, <http://designfortheivingworld.com>.

³ See the presentation of the project on our website, <http://designfortheivingworld.com/2013/04/10/savamala-a-place-for-making/>

⁴ See Marjetica Potrč and Design for the Living World, *The Soweto Project* (Berlin: Archive Books, and Turin: PAV, 2014), as well as the project presentation on our website: <http://designfortheivingworld.com/2013/04/15/soweto-the-soweto-project>.

Living in Neighborhoods without the State

In neither Belgrade nor Soweto had residents taken measures to change a situation that endangered the very existence of their neighborhoods. In Savamala, the local population faced aggressive urban development that for many would mean relocation, while in Soweto, people lived alongside unsafe and unhygienic public areas. Surprisingly, in both neighborhoods the residents had resigned themselves to the status quo and were doing nothing; there were no attempts to get people together to improve the situation. Sadly, there was no one around who could respond to the anger and frustration people felt or offer ideas for moving forward. In Belgrade, the government agencies that were supposed to regulate development were instead serving the interests of the developers' and ignoring the residents. In Soweto, municipal trash collection happened sporadically, if at all, and it seemed impossible to challenge the status quo. "That's just the way things are," people said. In both cities, the government was simply not there to serve them; essentially, the state had withdrawn, and although people silently acknowledged this as a problem, they also accepted it as a given. Not only did they not organize to address their situation, they resisted the very idea of self-organization. At a deeper level, they had become paralyzed in inaction because they perceived the public space as a space of trauma. Observing their attitudes, my students and I said it was as if they were living Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, in a kind of theater of the absurd.

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Public Space as Trauma

For the people of Soweto and Savamala, public space is a trauma. The Sowetans' story is especially telling. During apartheid, the black population was excluded from the public space and the public sphere. The exclusion is still felt as a painful loss, which has been internalized and translated into disregard and neglect of public space. This was evident, even twenty years after the end of apartheid, in the continued dumping of garbage on the land that became Ubuntu Park.

In Belgrade, meanwhile, after the political changes that swept through Eastern Europe in the early 1990s, residents had experienced

the loss of the public space, which under Communism was a political and ideological project representing the equality of all and the leading role of the working class. Such socialist ideals, however, were soon replaced by a rampant neoliberalism as the private sector began to supplant the dwindling public sector both in the political discourse and in everyday practice. Instead of fighting for the preservation and maintenance of public space and public rights, the people of Belgrade, not unlike the Sowetans, internalized their loss as they watched the gains of the former social agreement disappear. They themselves withdrew from the public space and the public sphere, which had once been theirs but were no longer.

As in Soweto, the neglected public space in Savamala became a theater of the residents' failed relationship with the state. The only way to overturn the established paradigm and heal the trauma was to self-organize in a physical space, and thus construct a new social agreement. The true success of Studio KM8 in Savamala and Ubuntu Park in Soweto is that they began a healing process for the trauma experienced by local residents.

The Four Steps of Participatory Design

The participatory design we practice in our projects follows four steps: talking with the local residents before making any definite plan; involving the community in all decision making; involving the community in all construction work; and finally, transferring responsibility for the project to the community so the work continues to benefit the population after we leave. If done correctly, participatory projects address the unwanted situation and bring about desired social change. For my students and me, the most important of these four steps is the final one, in which the residents themselves are expected to continue organizing and maintaining the project. As the students came to understand, a project is not successful until we who are the initiators of the project become irrelevant. We are aware that our involvement is only a small part of a lengthy process that will eventually lead to social change. Participatory projects take time.

The four steps of participatory design are not a new method, but the practice tends to be dismissed by neoliberal policies in cities that

view themselves as fast, global and unpolitical. On the other hand, it is gaining ground as people desire more resilient cities, slow cities that think in the long term, are focused on local situations, and are political. Here residents use participatory projects to empower themselves politically.

Artists and Designers as Mediators

In participatory projects, the researchers, artists and designers – all those who engage in critical artistic practice – are co-authors and mediators. The sharing of ideas and practices with local residents happens in a non-hierarchical exchange, on an equal level. Everyone is an expert, contributing knowledge according to their abilities. But as artists and designers, we do play a special role: we mediate between residents and institutions, including government agencies, and bring them together in a working network. Equally important, we mediate the kind of society residents aspire to. The construction of the future is especially important for residents who live in places where the state has failed or withdrawn. But our goal is not to act against the government or the state. We do not create “alternative” projects, which by definition exist only on the margins of the society and usually remain there.

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Relational Objects and Performative Actions – Acting in Space

Relational objects are tools that participants use to create relationships with a particular place and with the city they live in. We can think of relational objects as “nouns” – active nouns, since they create relationships – while performative actions are “verbs.” A performative action is an activity carried out in public which then has the potential to become a collective action. The Australian designer Tony Fry referred to collective actions that demonstrate the process of cultural remaking as “redirective practices.”⁵ In our practice we have learned that relational objects and performative actions are useful communicators, and what is more, they are crucial elements in the creation of a self-organized community. The social change desired by local residents cannot be

realized simply by talking about it. People need to get their hands dirty – clearing garbage, building tables, planting vegetables. Self-organization does not develop unless the members of the community act in the space, whether this is simply arranging the chairs for a community meeting or constructing a platform in a park. At the core of the process is the concrete physical space, which over time becomes a place. And those who participate in the making of the place can then say: “This is ours.”

Public Space Is a Social Agreement

Public space is, no more and no less, a social agreement. Without the social agreement there can be no public space, and when the social agreement deteriorates, public space becomes a dangerous no man’s land. An example of this is post-apartheid downtown Johannesburg, where even today there are frequent muggings and people can be attacked for no particular reason. As Giorgio Agamben writes, it is people who give meaning to the “empty throne” – the abandonment of state power.⁶ It is important to keep in mind that a social agreement is a temporary consensus and may change.

Successful participatory projects reinvent the failed public space by creating a community space, a space of open possibilities. This place is governed by the community itself; essentially, it is a new kind of public space, which is made possible by a new social agreement. In both the Savamala and Soweto projects, the public space was transformed into a community-organized and community-maintained public space.

Tools of Engagement: Towards a New Social Agreement

“Relational object” is only one of the terms in the new vocabulary we use to describe our participatory practice. Others include “performative action,” “rituals of transition,” “redirective practice,” “public space as trauma,” “placemaking,” “naming” and “community-building.” These are tools of engagement by

5 Discussed in his book *Design as Politics* (Oxford, UK: Berg, 2011); see especially the third chapter, “Redirection, Design and Things.”

6 Giorgio Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2011); see especially the chapter “The Archeology of Glory.”

which residents transform their social and spatial conditions. But while these new terms conceptualize society as an organism, they also describe the construction of society as a political project. Participatory projects are, indeed, political classrooms, not the performance of a natural society. Here, the social agreement that happens in a particular community and a particular place is a small-scale endeavor. But there is always a tendency for it to grow to a larger scale, to expand to a larger community and a wider territory. After all, it is basic human nature to tell others what you have learned.

Only primitive societies exist without a state.⁷ In Soweto and Savamala, however, the society is not primitive. In Savamala and Soweto, where the state's role has been missing or ineffective, residents enacted their failed relationship with the state by vandalizing public spaces. But all these communities are now building relationships with the state. As I was writing this text, I realized that during the same period when social and economic transformations were happening in the Brazilian state of Acre⁸, the unbearable status quo remained in place in Savamala and Soweto. Cities, after all, are weighed down by the civilization they have created and so are slower to develop sustainable and resilient communities than, say, remote rural Amazonia. Our participatory projects in Savamala and Soweto served as tools that the residents used to institutionalize social change in a bottom-up process. And it is important that we recognize the efforts of societies to construct new social agreements that benefit their communities and their lands.

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7 As Pierre Clastres notes in *Society against the State: Essays in Political Anthropology* (Brooklyn, NY: Zone Books, 1987): "Primitive societies in the main are devoid of real political organization" (p. 21).

8 For more on social and economic changes in Acre, see my article "*New Territories in Acre and Why They Matter*" e-flux journal, no. 0 (Nov. 2008), <http://e-flux.com/journal/view/10>.

Art Centers as Community Spaces

Mai Omer

The debate regarding the breakdown of humanities has been going on for some time. Even conservative institutions, such as museums and universities, have been forced to address it: museums are short of visitors, galleries and art centers stand empty for most of the day, humanities faculties in universities are closing, and the number of art students plummets further year by year.

The general view is that capitalism is the culprit. In capitalist culture, unprofitable ventures seem pointless.

But it is not enough to simply blame capitalism for humanities' waning relevance.

We should dare to ask: Is it possible that humanities (as we know them) have indeed become irrelevant?

And if so – we, practitioners of the humanities fields, must respond.

We must reassess our professions, and understand how our knowledge, abilities, and experience as professionals in these fields are necessary to the public in the time and place in which we function.

The rift between plastic art and the general public is established fact.

The art world spends much of its energies focusing inward, using terms known only to those within it, incomprehensible to everyone else.

The majority of art practitioners belong to an elite. Artists and curators are mostly from middle-class or higher backgrounds, and art collectors are wealthy.

Art is still partially financed by public funds (or private funding designated for public use), but is still generally dismissed by the public, and makes little effort to gain public interest.

Perhaps in reaction to this disassociation, the term “community” has become a buzzword, especially in the politically oriented parts of the art world. However, there are only a few projects that actually involve communities – and fewer still those that manage to bring about sociopolitical change.

Arts aspiration to be an agent of change is nothing new. There is an endless catalogue of artworks that were created in the hopes of promoting a more just society, although these may contradict the commonly held view of art as a lofty medium, the elitist stronghold of exclusive guilds.

Indeed, art has the power to function not only within the tandem relations of producers and consumers (or artists and collectors), but as a community that creates and consumes culture. In order to truly become a community agent, the art world must be fundamentally changed. It can no longer operate like a private club, accessible only to the most select, but must begin to function as a hub linking people. Art can no longer be a secret code, but instead a means of communication – and

not in the superficial, shallow, or populist sense – in a way that is active, comprehensible and thought provoking. The museums, galleries, and art centers may no longer be sterile spaces inciting unease. They must be inviting and encourage a sense of inclusion.

Art centers are often compared with churches. And if so, perhaps arts image must also be altered – from an awe-provoking Gothic cathedral to an Afro-American Baptist church with a reverend, choir, and congregation. All are partners in prayer, all create together, all belong to a community.

We must revisit the definition of “community”. What does this word signify in today’s age, who does it include. The community is essentially an association of belonging: belonging to an ideology, history, culture, or geographic area.

The Jewish ethos was based on community belonging, but in current-day Israel this belonging is complicated – and the belonging to place even more complex. The sense of feeling at home in Israel is under constant threat. Almost all ethnic or national groups living in Israel carry memories of being deported, becoming refugees, having immigrated, or suffering a lack belonging in some other way. Israeli society bears the scars of trauma – absorption centers, immigration camps, detainment facilities, prisons, and transit camps. Many perceive themselves as persecuted minorities.

In Israel of 2015, after years of neoliberal economy, community and solidarity have all but disappeared.

Interpersonal relations are difficult. We are nearing ever closer to the Thatcher model whereby society as a collective does not exist, and only individuals are left. As some small compensation for the disappearance of living communities, we witness the rise of patriotism, which is seen as militant, security-focused, powerful, and masculine – in contrast to communities, which seem weak, worthless, and pathetic.

The word “community” is used more often to address underprivileged, marginalized, or deprived groups. When one considers community action, the idea of a poor neighborhood comes to mind, not a wealthy suburb.

The associations that spring to mind when thinking of communities is related to the condescension normally directed at social workers, teachers, or kindergarten teachers.

Is this the right association?

It is community which provides us a sense of worth, belonging and strength. It allows us to truly cope, truly live. Unlike patriotism, which delivers nothing more than a false sense of power.

It may be that the loss of community and solidarity is the reason large population groups in Israel feel as they do – without place. They do not lack for physical space. But people who have no true place feel no sense of belonging, they feel detached, and invisible. They feel unknown, of no existence. Prime Minister Netanyahu makes cynical use of this reality when referencing acknowledgment of the State of Israel: the acknowledgment that the country's citizens wish for as their lives, needs, their places, and their right to have a place are unacknowledged.

The key argument in the debate regarding Israel's place is that “we are a small country”, a justification for policies to deport refugees, Palestinians and work migrants, much like the argument justifying the unceasing increase in real-estate prices, further fueling the sense of “placelessness” as the cycle keeps revolving.

This disassociation and lack of belonging often translate to transparency and blindness. In a society empty of place, those placeless people are either invisible, or a possible threat that may replace you. This is one of the fundamental roots creating a lack of solidarity in Israeli society, with an approach to otherness that ranges from blindness to terror. The blindness is directed inward, as much as it is to others¹.

More abstractly, disassociation means feeling insignificant, weightless, without presence, a sense of existence that leaves no traces, as if one were too insubstantial to take up space.

Perhaps this is a kind of situation that leads to futility – to living life with a sense of disregard and dismissal.

In a reality where people have no place, providing it is a political act of supreme significance.

The solution is not just concrete (providing a physical place). It requires a change of attitude, approach, and perspective. A place must be given in the emotional, spiritual, and psychical space. A place that imbues a sense of belonging.

This is a political act based on the acknowledgment of our presence and the importance of the individual. An act restoring people's power and their ability to impact.

Providing a place for individuals is a significant act – and providing this to the public is an act filled with the potential to change society as a whole. The public-community place.

This also requires a new reckoning. Public buildings allude to the bureaucratic system. Community centers raise associations of wretchedness and ugliness. But public buildings can be places of civil power and influence (a good place to again remember the Afro-American church, and the impact of the civil rights movement).

A public place is a gathering point, somewhere to catch up, exchange opinions, and hold discussions. It's a place that creates dialogue and instigates civic action. A place where you feel part of a community. A place where your presence means something, a place where you are aware of the presence of others.

There are public places in Israel. What was once found in the kibbutz people's hall or dining hall is now in cafés, pubs, the neighborhood kiosk, street benches, or the local playground.

And so, how does one create an inviting place? How can a place encourage activity and activism? How can it establish a sense of home, belonging, and influence?

In order to answer these questions, I will describe the successes of Project Hall – and also mention the ways in which these terms and insights served us in redesigning the new entrance to the Center for Digital Art.

Project Hall - a public building that was previously a school sport's hall – is a place to meet, create, and learn. An art project of artists Mai Omer, Luciana Kaplun, Ira Shalit, and teenagers of the Jesse Cohen neighbourhood, has transformed this gymnasium into an alternative infrastructure for social action. It is a place that allows people of the local community to gather, plan, establish and create.

We began in January 2014 - artists Mai Omer, Luciana Kaplun, Ira Shalit – started working with children who live close to the Center for Digital Art. The majority of them were from the Ethiopian community. This work led to the establishment of significant ties between the Center and the local community.

The project sprung from the desire to use art as a tool for social and political change: not to create art that simply addresses what exists, but art that creates something new.

¹ Much has been written about Israeli national character as typified by an undermined sense of physicality, spatial perception, and lack of boundaries.

From day one in the project we were resolute in our goal to establish a group comprised of local community members that would work with us. To establish a group that creates together new infrastructure for change. This was founded on the belief that artworks are not merely objects, events or exhibitions; rather – art has the power to encourage a sense of worth, power, visibility and affiliation. To generate social change.

The guiding principle was that both project outcomes, as well as the knowledge, abilities and talents that produced these outcomes, would be shared. Meaning, the knowledge and tools we employ as artists would be accessible and useful to our partners – while their knowledge would be available to us in turn. We hoped this would be the way to engender a creative process relevant to our time and place.

The Center for Digital Art is located in the Jesse Cohen neighbourhood of Holon, in a compound that was previously the Weizman Elementary School (and local kids still call it by that name). Then and today, the majority of compound grounds are used as an open public space, with a small soccer field at its center. As a meeting place, the Center enjoys a significant advantage over other neighbourhood public spaces: it provides free Wi-Fi. Thanks to all these, the Center is a popular meeting place, and teens often spend their after-school hours there. Even before beginning our work together, teenagers frequented the compound almost as regularly as the Center staff. Although the familiarity established prior to the project was superficial, it sufficed as a basis to invite them to collaborate without being too abrupt.

In addition, the teenager of Jesse Cohen have a lot of time to burn. For the most part, they have to cope with problems stemming from boredom, not overload². Their availability and curiosity made it clear to us that significant action would be possible. The decision to collaborate came naturally.

When the Center began operating in Jesse Cohen, we started by asking residents and leading neighbourhood figures how we could contribute to it. The answer was always invariably to “do something with the children”. Understandably, any activity of the Center that included children and teens produced impressive local turnout.

So too with Project Hall.

In the early days of the group’s activities, prior to even securing a

permanent place for the project, we collaborated on building a bicycle.

The bicycle served as an object to gather around: something to work on, an object that establishes the group and dictates its rules of joint action.

From the moment we had a permanent place, the hall, we abandoned the bicycle. The hall itself became the object in which we could gather into a group, both concretely and symbolically.

The hall serves many functions: it constitutes a place to build, create, improve, play, meet, converse and rest.

There are times it addresses a particular need (such as when someone wishes to use the equipment, like the sewing machine, or use a wrench, or just the space).

Other times, the hall hosts organized activities that have a beginning, middle and end – like a class, workshop, or movie screening. For the most part, it is a place to just spend time, like a café, local pub, or members club: a place to simply hang out.

The hall is unique in that it provides both privacy and community. A homey place outside home. A place that, above all, makes you feel you belong.

Teenagers need such places. They need their own spaces outside home and the family fold, which still has adult supervision (but not by a parent or teacher). They need a safe place, a place where they can establish their identity as adults in society, not only children in a family unit or students in school.

Building the hall was accomplished together with the teens (additional children and adolescents joined the project when the place was mostly complete).

It was built with an approach of guidance, direction and learning while working, and reliance on materials found mostly in the streets or in the municipal warehouse.

The magic of the place is the magic of simplicity and accessibility. It does not stem from fascination with splendour, but from a “DIY spirit”, and use of what you have at hand, and the belief in producing something in an unmediated way. The DIY approach was an important principle. It allows us to address lack by improvising, and employing the tools and knowledge available in the place without having to rely on institutional contributions.

2 The excess of free time of children and adolescents is not unique to Jesse Cohen. Generally speaking, free time of children (and the elderly) in Israel is a burden, while the adult and employed population suffers from a severe lack of free time. Jesse Cohen is typified by an extreme gap between the free time of children compared to the lack of same for adults.

The significance of this approach became apparent to me through another project I participated in: “Glocal Neighbours”, tying Jesse Cohen and the Nordbahnhof neighborhood of Stuttgart, an area also dealing with problems of poverty, immigration, and a problematic attitude to institutions.

The tour of Nordbahnhof clarified to me how important the DIY and direct action approaches were as activist, environmental and educational perceptions. It was there I became profoundly familiar with German leisure culture, and realized its correlation to these approaches. Our partners in Nordbahnhof presented us with several examples in which the “DIY aesthetic” proved more beneficial than cleaner, more organized aesthetics, as well as examples where direct action created a more pleasant environment for them than waiting passively for institutional intervention. In Israel, the majority of children never learn to use hammer and nails; they tend to wait for the superintendent to fix whatever needs fixing, and for the system to make things right. In Nordbahnhof, I managed to identify the repercussions of this attitude on the public space and the political arena of Israel.

The “Glocal Neighbours” project made clear how important these principle are, as well as their political and educational potential.

Another guiding principle of the project is flexibility: as a method of action, a philosophy, and space design. The hall allows for a range of activities and uses, and so must be adaptable to every situation. It often needs to accommodate several different activities simultaneously (while some kids build with wood, others watch a film, and others still play ball). And so, almost every object in the hall (certainly all heavy ones) are on wheels. The hall is easily modified to change from an open space to an intimate environment: you can play soccer, while also conducting conversation over coffee.

We also believe that dynamic spaces encourage those who enter them to make changes, alter space to meet current needs, and make a place their own. This is not a predetermined space where users must be the ones to adjust. Quite the reverse: the space must change to suit users. Just as in physical training, you may use an unstable surface in order to strengthen balance and muscles, so too can a dynamic space strengthen the flexibility and activism of artistic-community action.

During construction, and the stay there, the hall was transformed into something beyond merely a place we to meet. It became a community structure functioning as a public space. It extends the community garden and the neighborhood grounds, but here there is an enclosed space with infrastructure for additional activities. It is a rich, enabling public space. A place for leisure and leisure culture, a pleasant and inviting place where teenagers can just arrive, not just for events or activities, but simply because they feel they belong there.

The success in establishing a community place also generated other positive changes among project participants, Center staff, and the neighborhood. Community structures are indeed important – and not only to the youth of Jesse Cohen, but to all of Israeli society.

Thus far, the challenge was to build a place for one community, a relatively homogenous one.

Now, as we build the new entrance to the Center for Digital Art, we have determined a new challenge for ourselves: to create a place to be and spend time designed for different and varied groups and audiences, and to understand how the Center can bring people in, create belonging among people of different populations.

Can we build a place that consolidates a community comprised of heterogeneous groups, even if its existence only lasts for a handful of moments? This is a significant challenge, particularly in view of the fact that Israeli communities are constantly segregated, as well as the hostility between ethnicities, nationalities, and communities, one that often hits peaks of animosity.

It seems the creation of belonging and solidarity between communities is a political challenge of inestimable relevance. Perhaps it is part of our role as scholars and artists: to consider the possibility of establishing places of belonging.

CULTURAL EXCHANGE IS DEAD LONG LIVE ARTISTIC NETWORKS

Matthias Einhoff

Cultural Exchange is dead, long live artistic networks!

When the Wasteland Twinning Network was founded in 2010, the idea of subverting the concept of town twinning in order to apply it to urban wastelands, got inspiration from the Twin Towns Gardens in the city of Holon found in a Wikipedia article on ‚Town Twinning’¹. The ‚garden’ representing the twinning partnership with cities all over the world, looks like a well maintained oversized graveyard, with three-dimensional interpretations of each cities’ emblems. Built from visible concrete it combines the idea of tradition and abstract modernism, a strange hybrid of anachronistic and futuristic designs. The Twin Towns Gardens embodies what the twinning concept stood

for: to parade a city's more predictable cultural assets and to create a mutual understanding on a person to person level by exchanging these assets in given rituals. The relevance of town twinning, which was heavily promoted in the late 40ties and 50ties, is undisputed: following two world wars, the importance of citizens meeting each other on eye level, and checking the realities of former enemy countries has been a great challenge and it has been of great importance for re-establishing international relations after years of propaganda on all sides.

Today things look different: global communication has never been easier, and a growing wealth in the western world¹ has led to an exponential growth in travel. Going to other countries is no longer a challenge, it's a necessity! Exploring the realities of other nations through authentic accommodations and food have become essentials for the citizen of the ,Erlebnisgesellschaft'².

Today's mobility through tourism and trade has become so common-place, that the necessity for citizens exchanging in stiff town twinning rituals, in order to create mutual understanding, seems fairly obsolete. But today's town twinning is about more than that: In an introduction to the publication ,Take your partners' from 2006 published by the ,Local government international bureau', an institution supporting cities to find partner cities, we are told that ,Increasing globalisation and European integration mean that we live in a world that is more connected and interdependent than ever before. It's a world in which the role of local government is becoming more important and in which local authorities both compete and cooperate with each other.'³ The idea of ,competition', not just between the known global city brands, but between smaller local authorities of all sizes is introduced. It's a marketplace, not a town hall!

A recent BBC documentation ,Twin towns: Do we still need them?'⁴ perfectly documents this shift in understanding of interpersonal exchange. The focal point of the documentation is the economic value of town twinning. Various stakeholders are interviewed and outline what town twinning means to them, and justify why they are involved. A young student being asked why she is part of an exchange program, argues: ,We don't want to be a useless expense to the city, we want to bring money in. This

1 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Twin_towns_and_sister_cities

2 in reference to: Gerhard Schulze (1992): Die Erlebnisgesellschaft: Kultursoziologie der Gegenwart. Frankfurt a.M.: Campus (Studienausgaben 2000 und 2005)

3 <https://web.archive.org/web/20110717021118/http://www.lga.gov.uk/lga/aio/190428>

4 <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-23517210>

is not about being selfish...'. In another moment in the documentary, the strong relationship between two local fire-brigades is highlighted by a fund-raising action. And a local representative argues, that the city still has to optimise the economic benefits coming from the twinning relationship. The documentary leaves us with the impression, that the notion of intercultural exchange as an economic stimulus in a global market has been understood by every individual in the film. The key argument for cities to still twin is the economical surplus: fostering trade relations, promoting the respective educational system, paving the way for tourism, etc..

The meaning of town twinning has shifted from being a platonic network, a first and fragile step to develop empathetic understanding for individuals of former enemy nations, to becoming a selling point in the global competition for customers and quality-labor, This is paradigmatic for the change in global relations: It's all about the business - we're no longer citizens, we are customers and salesmen. We don't just meet and greet, we promote and consume.

Wasteland Twinning Network: Exploring urban value outside the current value system

The foundation of Wasteland Twinning Network was a reaction to the increasing commercialization of Berlin's urban landscape: Within a decade Berlin has become a global city brand. In short, it's most valuable assets have been sold and what used to be a playground for citizens with plenty of undefined and unregulated spaces, is now a showroom for tourists. One of the cities most undervalued qualities was the existence of ,wastelands' due to the reunification process: Urban wastelands support inner city biodiversity, provide carbon sinks, improve hydrological attenuation, provide open space and represent freedom from the controlled built environment. The common notion still remains that wastelands are of no value until developed.⁵

The Wasteland Twinning Network wanted to challenge this notion, it wanted to take a different standpoint, to examine qualities that go beyond market value and to compare these values with other wastelands worldwide.

promotion, seemed like a perfect vehicle to jump on, and to subvert: What about rituals that highlight the misery of abandoned space instead of polished city centers? What about observations of junkies and dog-owners, instead of meetings with mayors and successful entrepreneurs? Wasteland Twinning is all about providing space for research and activities, that fall out of the current value system and allow us, to look at and reflect upon failure, slowness, entropy, etc..

It used to be a challenge for citizens of different nationality to meet on a personal level - it needed the town twinning framework to do so. Now the challenge is to allow yourself to act outside of the market system - it needs a network to do so. Since this kind of network is not a place for the regular ‚homo economicus‘, it has to become a place for artists. Despite an increasing pressure to be economically sustainable as an artist (by being successful in the art market), the artistic world is still an environment, where production does not have to make sense economically to be socially acceptable. Artists still have the freedom to examine, to produce and to critically reflect upon the current economic determinism. And even though the position of artists is still being questioned, like it has always been, it is more important than ever to challenge the world beyond its increasingly monological paradigms.

Since the planet is connected by common interests of trade and tourism, it is increasingly important for artists to connect, compare and express concerns in exchange with artists from different contexts: Artistic networks will help to see the complexity and interdependencies, they will strengthen the position of the individual artist and will help to disseminate local knowledge and conclusions. Artistic networks will enable artists to stay critical commentators of globally connected political developments. Wasteland Twinning Network is just an example for how artists can question an economically deterministic approach to our society and to do what no-one can afford to do anymore: looking at the slow and undynamic aspects of our lives.

