

NEIGHBOURHOOD WORKSHOPS

NEIGHBOURHOOD PROJECTS



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2011

► SUMMARY

Neighbourhood projects can put together artists, cultural operators and inhabitants of a given area in workshops, situations, art projects and events that can nurture a community, enrich the language of art and culture, enhance the dialogue between different parts of our society, deal with social issues and conflicts, open the door to mutual understanding, discover and build common memories and facilitate inclusion.

► CONTEXT

This workshop, entitled “Neighbourhood artistic projects”, took place on Friday 28 October 2011 during

THE 28TH OCTOBER 2011, TNT - BORDEAUX
Trans Europe Halles meeting n° 72 at TNT cultural centre in Bordeaux. The discussion was guided by one facilitator, Karl Hallberg from Not Quite cultural centre in Fengersfors, Sweden, and two guest speakers, Edwina Goldstone from Verkatehdas, Hämeenlinna, Finland, and Guy-André Lagesse from Les Pas Perdus collective, Marseille, France.

The participants were coming from different cultural centres all over Europe, between them Le Havre (F), Bologna (I), Lund (S), Aubervilliers (F), Bordeaux (F), Stavanger (N), Verona (I), Paris (F), Belfast (UK), Žilina (SK) and more.

► BRIEF SUMMARY

Artistic projects involving the local community or the neighbourhood are perceived to be a very important mean to root independent cultural centres in the area where they operate and produce cultural activities and events. They can be a tool to improve the legitimacy of a cultural centre or a collective operating in a given area, they can give a boost of energy and ideas and they can set in motion several useful and creative interactions between the artists and/or the cultural operators and the locals. Creating artistic and cultural projects able to involve the local communities can build the social cohesion and improve the relations between different parts of the local society. Art can also be used to celebrate and enhance the local character of a neighbourhood, which can be subsequently become interesting for visitors. If local inhabitants have the chance to work hands-on on an artistic project, this can create a sense of neighbourhood ownership and identification. Involving locals in the artistic process can open new perspectives on the artistic process itself and give the participants the chance to express their feelings and tell their stories. Neighbourhood projects can also be instrumental in making art more “democratic” and in helping to solve some social conflicts or tensions, working against social exclusion.

Ada Arduini

Text written on the basis of discussions in Bordeaux on 28/10/2011 during the workshop on “Neighbourhood projects”

Coordination Trans Europe Halles and ARTfactories/AUTre(s)pARTs

► LONG SUMMARY

Artistic projects involving the local community or the neighbourhood are perceived to be a very important mean to root independent cultural centres in the area where they operate and produce cultural activities and events. They can be a tool to improve the legitimacy of a cultural centre or a collective operating in a given area, they can give a boost of energy and ideas and they can set in motion several useful and creative interactions between the artists and/or the cultural operators and the locals. Creating artistic and cultural projects able to involve the local communities can build the social cohesion and improve the relations between different parts of the local society. Art can also be used to celebrate and enhance the local character of a neighbourhood, which can be subsequently become interesting for visitors. If local inhabitants have the chance to work hands-on on an artistic project, this can create a sense of neighbourhood ownership and identification. Involving locals in the artistic process can open new perspectives on the artistic process itself and give the participants the chance to express their feelings and tell their stories. Neighbourhood projects can also be instrumental in making art more "democratic" and in helping to solve some social conflicts or tensions, working against social exclusion.

The experiences of Not Quite (Sweden), Verkatehdas (Finland) and Les Pas Perdus (France), plus the feedback given by the participants to the workshop, around twenty people coming from cultural centres all over Europe, can help to better understand why neighbourhood projects are important, how to deal with them and how to build a creative and fulfilling exchange with the local communities in which these centres operate.

Not Quite, Fengersfors, Sweden

Karl Hallberg, TEH delegate for Not Quite, presented some neighbourhood projects created by their centre, a group of former industrial buildings located in the countryside, on the shores of a lake, now refurbished and inhabited by artists. The artists from Not Quite believe in the interactive and creative dialogue with the local population and in the importance of the local public spaces, some of which they thought could be rediscovered experimenting with art. Their first concern was to satisfy the needs of the locals concerning the use of those public spaces, and at the same time to offer them a new perspective from which re-experiment and

re-use those places: aware of the importance of the community in which they live and which surrounds them, they were also very aware of being sometimes considered by locals "strange" and "apart", since they live in this kind of artists commune.

To improve and enhance their relationship with the local community, they started asking some artists in residence to create interventions on public spaces, like the local beach or woods, offering the audience new materials to play and create with (big balls floating in the water), new ideas on how to perceive differently the surrounding natural environment (the new game of "forest soccer"), new ways to look at and inhabit an everyday scenery or situation (a bathtub immersed in the lake's waters). This way, they could overcome the suspiciousness of some locals and start a silent dialogue made of colourful horse paintings left in the fields, as a way to approach the owners of such horses with irony and fun. The experiment was fruitful and exhilarating.



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Verkatehdas, Hämeenlinna, Finland

Verkatehdas is a gallery and an art organization that puts together 80 artists and its goal is to bridge the gap between art and public in many respects. To do so, the centre manages a gallery and a series of art studios donated by the municipality: the artists are invited in participating in community projects, giving workshops and lectures, meeting the audience and so on. Some of the workshops are meant for children, elders or people with mental issues. They also organize art auctions and art "rents", as a way to give the audience the chance to own a work of art for a short period of time. Apart from trying to involve in their activities parts of the local community that usually don't have access to visual arts, for Verkatehdas neighbourhood projects are a very useful and effective way of attracting public attention on

common issues or on disused and underused spaces. Their audience is wide: elementary school children, immigrants, unemployed people, disabled people, and they can count on the collaboration of the art council, artists associations, museum, theatres, community centres, the academy of music, radios, schools, teachers.

One of their neighbourhood projects involved a former power station in a participative event where some artists worked together with the local community to enliven the place, formerly abandoned, and make it an archive for memories and shared identity through a series of art installations.

For Verkatehdas, neighbourhood projects enhance trust between inhabitants of the same community, help them to share goals and activities, open the door to innovation and renewal, boost change, attract attention on the environment: all this is achieved through a kind of "collaborative chaos", a constructive confrontation based on communication and shared community values.



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Les Pas Perdus, Marseille, France

Les Pas Perdus is a collective based in Marseille: they were invited by the municipality of a depressed, former mining village in the north of France to attract attention on their community, so helping them reaching the status of Heritage Site. This collective built a series of funfair installations, paths and activities, using discarded or recycled materials, but also starting and taking inspiration from the stories of the inhabitants of the community, trying to bring people together and to involve them using their shared experiences. Fun, jokes, irony, colour, music and friendliness were the weapons they used to get in touch with the locals, and they succeeded. Les Pas Perdus is especially interested in putting together things apparently unconnected, in creating new

and unexpected links, in recovering the spirit of making things from scratch, in "sharing a state of nothingness", and the pure and simple idea of fun and ridiculousness. The storytelling process was pivotal in building and creating the ideas for the installations: local people were invited to talk about themselves and their desires, and the goal of the project was exactly to help them find their way to express those desires.

Artists, cultural operators and the community

The participants to the workshop, artists and cultural operators, interrogated themselves on the reasons why art and cultural centres should be so interested in creating and organizing neighbourhood projects, and a discussion ensued.

Why should artists choose to operate and create together with the members of a given community or social group? Through this kind of projects, instead of being viewed as an isolated and individual "genius", the artist becomes a cultural catalyst, an integral part of a larger process of social intervention and transformation. He/she can fulfil his/her need to connect with the audience, reaching a sort of "artistic democracy" in avoiding the elitism of official art, and at the same time fighting against mainstream and consumerism. Sharing an artistic process with the local community could mean for him/her to open a new universe of stories, to adopt and understand different points of view: this way the artist can hear new voices in new contexts, enriching his/her creative tools and enlarging his/her creative spectrum. For them, it can be a way of exploring a given community's commonalities and differences, engaging in a conversation and a dialogue full of potentialities. The artist uses the power of artistic creation and expression to spark new ideas and elicit new actions, both from people who participate in the creative process and those who witness its results. Art can catalyze critical thinking, inspire individuals to work together, create visions, heal. This energy, in turn, helps catalyze, inspire and heal the community artist who facilitates its development.

Cultural operators alike are well aware of the fact that only reacting to local needs and feeling more rooted in their local communities, they can fulfil their potentialities and their mission. Engaging in this kind of community projects, they can offer their audience an amazing way to share experiences, they can let them take part in the artistic process and empower them, giving them the tools to recover their memory as a community and their active role in society. Art centres are often at risk of

existing in a world apart, and sometimes need to be better connected with the surrounding reality, finding a longer perspective from which to explore art processes and from which understanding their role in their neighbourhood. Also, people working in cultural centres engaged in neighbourhood or community projects frequently report an increased sense of pride, founded in the recognition that they have made a substantive contribution to their environment, and in the awareness of having concurred in engaging in these community projects, the inhabitants of a given neighbourhood can feel that what they are building together is something that represents their different voices and gives them recognition inside their city or region. What they are creating is something that comes from the discussion of their needs and their storytelling, and it's far from being an impersonal and official project handed from above, or the product of an individual creative mind, but it's the result of a common effort and a common sensibility, obtained through dialogue, reflection and collaboration. *The aesthetic process inherent in these projects gives people the chance to think and to identify the things that they deem to be important for their present and future.* As they go about their everyday lives, participants recognize each other and spontaneously continue the conversation started during the building of the project. They also experience other community interactions in new ways: everything people hear and see can become resource material for the project. Community projects like these give people a sense of action, of the efficacy of being involved. Well-planned projects of this kind can create many opportunities for all kind of people to participate, involving them in the planning, artmaking, fundraising, and celebrating, facilitating the access to "arts" and "culture" even for those categories of people that are less likely to benefit from it. The process of a neighbourhood project allows the community to use and value its own range of abilities: craft skills, organizing know-how, technical knowledge, ability to fundraise, and so on. When regular participants experience their creative and technical skills growing throughout the process, their commitment and enthusiasm increases, their focus deepens.

Also, society can benefit from these projects: they are a humble and basic way of building bridges between different communities, of helping people reclaim their ownership of the streets and of abandoned or misused places, of encouraging them to take responsibility for their environment and the neighbourhood they live in.

Neighbourhood projects can help building a community where there is no one, can enhance awareness of what surrounds it, can encourage people to rediscover a place or an area with new eyes and a new perspective. Individuals and organizations can work together to have an impact on people's lives, and share a common sense of the importance of their work. Another important outcome is the outside recognition that a high-quality neighbourhood project can bring to a community. Such a project can change the perception of a community in the city, or even on a national level. These projects are a powerful way for communities to represent themselves in more complex ways to the world. Also, a *community may not have a strong sense of its own many qualities or of the uniqueness of its local cultural traditions. A project of this kind can act as an "external eye" able to help a community seeing and appreciating itself. Traditionally, art and culture have always been a mean to investigate and represent various aspects of human experience: through this investigation, a community can learn more about itself, and through these neighbourhood projects art becomes a place where a community identifies its past successes, its current values, and then attempts to formulate common goals.*



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The issue of participation

Building participation is a process that has many different aspects: cultural centres can put this clockwork in motion organizing meetings with neighbourhood informal groups and official organizations alike, to collect more information about their needs, and should support smaller local groups, trying in the meantime to find a common language to communicate and share ideas and goals. Even architecture can be helpful in inviting the neighbourhood to access the centre, and vice versa: there are wonderful examples of arts and culture centres

that were able to literally tear down their walls to encourage the approach of those audiences that normally don't attend cultural events as such.

Meanwhile, artists and cultural operators should also literally walk through their neighbourhoods, meet people, attend local meeting places, even enter their houses, find the right connections and try to involve people directly in their ideas and events: so that people become the real rough material of the project. In doing so, it's very important to listen to neighbours' stories, and of course this should be reciprocated: artists and cultural operators should also be able and inclined to share some of their experiences and stories too, creating a non-ending fruitful dialogue able to generate common goals and common ideas. The relationship between art and culture centres and the neighbourhood they live in, should be infused with the same trust that we have for our neighbours at home: neighbours are the ones we ask to water our plants when we are away.

We should also be aware of the fact that our activities cannot be 100% inclusive: there would always be people not inclined to enter our centre, or to participate in our common projects. Aware of that, we should be happy of the fact that we succeeded in giving the participants the chance to be proactive, to interact in a common project in which they can find the answer to spoken and non-spoken needs. This is a process in which we will also experience tensions, oppositions or lack of resolution: we should be prepared to face the ups and downs involved in dealing with a project that puts together a huge part of our community. This said, we know that when people see a fantastic project in their neighborhood, they perceive themselves as being part of a community that can produce something of high quality: this can overcome the negative feelings originating from living in difficult neighbourhoods or in prosperous places that lack a sense of cohesion and belonging.

Finally, time is a basic issue: *we must be aware we cannot bring people together and expect that in the very first meeting they find ease, trust, and the ability to communicate a common sense of what they are concerned about. Dialogues and meetings must be planned over a period of time so people can hear each other, reflect, and come back: we should be patient and prepared to see things develop slowly but steadily. It's important to open the conversation and let it flow, giving it the time to develop and to produce several resources*

and materials for the project. Time is part of the project, and patience is essential to achieve the goals we have set for us.

The tools

The first step for artists, cultural centres and communities working together in a neighbourhood project is the engagement in a dialogue, the creation of opportunities for people to come together and talk. The goal of this dialogue is not to come up with a single narrative or statement: through the dialogue, participants identify images and concepts that reflect the complexity of the world they live in. The most productive projects are generated by a multiplicity of voices: a collaboration among artists, administrators, parents, young people and community members able to engage in a continuous conversation on different levels, in different fields, about different personal stories. In this process, it's more enriching to explore all the art forms (dance, theatre, music, visual arts, literary arts) but also all kind of crafts and skills. It's not compulsory to have an activist agenda; a neighbourhood project can celebrate cultural traditions or provide a space for a community to reflect. But even such projects share activism's commitment to collective, not strictly individual, representation. It's also true that this commitment and involvement is achievable giving people the opportunity to give their individual contribution that will be incorporated into the final event: this will make their relationship with the project stronger and more personal.



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Fun, play and games have huge potentials in helping us to talk and share with our neighbours, since it's a very simple and basic communication tool. Very often cultural and art projects are perceived as events that, in a way, can exclude some elements of the society, and arts centres as places with a very set and rigid structure:

widening the access to art and cultural events through the means of fun and play, trying also to involve children in the project, can be very rewarding.

It's also important not to have any kind of expectation, to be open to any kind of suggestion and need, to be like sponges, able to soak up information and feelings. *Communities are fluent and open to change and redefinition: the art and culture centre should be as flexible, and able to change its plans according to the needs and urges of the communities they would like to represent, helping them express their concerns and creative impulses without prejudices.* One of the best qualities for artists and centres involved in community projects is flexibility, the ability to offer different options and to change plans quickly, following the needs of the local communities.

It is essential to have a very clear idea of how our neighbourhood is shaped, geographically and socially, and maybe a mapping of the area could be useful at this point: it would help to identify our strengths and to point out our weaknesses. Searching the help of urbanists, architects, social workers can be pivotal and full of potentials about the needs of the community in which the art and culture centre is located.



Families and children are very important parts of the society and they can be useful in establishing links and communications with the surrounding community: offering activities to mothers, fathers and children alike could be a good strategy in building reciprocal trust. The capacity building for the local community starts from approaching children and their families and offering them activities and workshops able to facilitate their exchange and their dialogue with the centre. Also, working and fruitful relationships with schools can be very helpful in creating and nurturing a learning system

in which the expression of creativity at large should have an important educational role.

Finally, the relationship with the local municipality is very important in helping us to reach our goals, even if this dialogue is often quite difficult: the key is the same that we use in our relationship with the neighbours. We should aim to share a common language and to find a common ground for discussion, we should always be inclined to listen and communicate, facilitating the ongoing conversation and always letting a door open to exchange and improvement.

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