The City as Platform

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Engagement with the public is the central focus in the practices of many artists and designers who deal with urban public space. Art historian Mariska van den Berg analyses three examples that investigate how to call a halt to dysfunctional public spaces in the city and how to reinterpret the relation between citizens and the government.

Artists, architects and designers are increasingly going against the mainstream of commercialization, privatization and regulation of urban space and taking initiatives to create public places that offer divergent forms of use that reflect criticism of the normal practice of urban planning. What significance do such initiatives have for the city? What are the underlying views on urban publicness? In what ways is the public domain taking shape? And (how) is it possible to influence accepted practice and the politics that steer the development of the contemporary city? The following is an attempt to answer these questions, based on analyses of the Hustadt Project by Apolonija Šušteršicˇ in Bochum; the Freehouse project by Jeanne van Heeswijk in the Afrikaander district in Rotterdam; two projects by KUNSTrePUBLIK from Berlin, namely Skulpturenpark Berlin Zentrum, and Zentrum für Kunst und Urbanistik (ZKU); and the knowledge platform Tussentijd in Ontwikkeling by Sabrina Lindemann et al.

Hustadt Project

In September 2008, architect and artist Apolonija Šušteršicˇ moved to the northern German city of Bochum, where she was asked within the framework of an urban renewal programme to make a proposal for an art project on one of the large squares in Hustadt, situated in an expansion area of the city of Bochum built in the late 1960s. This district is characterized by modernist residential towers and bungalows surrounded by greenery, and although the word 'Utopia' was even used while it was under construction, by 2008 the area faced problems ascribed to a combination of a multicultural population, high unemployment and vacancy.

What started out as a participatory art project soon developed into a form of local self-organization involving residents, activists and social welfare organizations, in which the topic of discussion was the restructuring of the area. In reaction to the delineated administrative process within which the improvement of the area was supposed to take shape, Šušteršicˇ set herself the goal of creating the conditions for real participation on the part of the residents and letting them have a say. Immediately after arriving – she was to live in Hustadt for three years – she organized a workshop in which she invited residents to think about the square's history, current situation and future. In that first inventory, what especially came to the fore was a desire for vitality. To that end, Šušteršicˇ started building a temporary pavilion inside the support posts of the old pergola. In combination with a few simple tools, such as tables and a notice board, a place was created that was promptly utilized by many different groups and associations for parties and meetings. In addition, Šušteršicˇ did research and programming for the temporary pavilion herself. For two years, experiments were made with various forms of informal and artistic use, resulting in an

open platform around which new connections and (incidental) groups formed.

Although these activities were not opposed, the town councillors did not appreciate the idea of activists being involved in the restructuring of the area. An official reaction to the sketch plan that Šušteršicˇ had previously submitted for the construction of a new pavilion also took a long time in coming. Meanwhile, the square, which previously had primarily functioned as a transit area, developed into a place where people could come together; moreover, they proved willing to help organize it. What the official agencies had not succeeded in doing had now succeeded: this non-institutional and informal approach reached many groups of residents and created a delicate social fabric within which they were beginning to feel at home.

By now, a core group had formed that still wanted to participate in the talks on the restructuring of the square, with the pavilion being an integral part of the new design. Parallel to the official planning process, they accordingly came up with an alternative proposal, which the city-appointed landscape architect also liked. This proposal, which emphasized the practical value of the surroundings, was at odds with the top-down approach that was dictated by maintaining the value of the property. The official reaction was that the scheduled public participation had already taken place and that there was no money. In reality, there was a lack of political will.

Šušteršicˇ and the residents succeeded in raising funds for the construction of the pavilion themselves, and finally received permission from the government agencies. Out of necessity – the place ultimately did not 'really' belong to them – these funds were given to the city in a roundabout way. Because of the tight budget, they built the pavilion themselves. But prior to that, all those involved were required to commit themselves in writing to its future management. In September 2011, it was festively inaugurated.

Freehouse

The Freehouse project in Rotterdam by artist Jeanne van Heeswijk is also characterized by the search for a democratic and inclusive public space where different cultural groups emerge and moreover actively participate in its design. Van Heeswijk took this initiative herself as a reaction to the official analysis of the malaise in the Afrikaander district and to its approach aimed at improving the hygiene and safety of the poorly functioning centrally located market. She saw the market not as a problem but as an opportunity for reviving the district. She started from what was already being produced in the neighbourhood and what there was in latent talent. In doing so, she did not approach the residents as consumers, but offered them a perspective as producers. The formalized market, with its strict regulations with regard to the on-site preparation and selling of food, offered hardly any possibilities for this, but Van Heeswijk managed to get the regulations eased. As a result, the mobile kitchen that Freehouse had set up as an experiment was able to develop into the Wijkkeuken van Zuid (kitchen of Rotterdam South). And the sewing studio, which now offers a platform for the skills of Moroccan women trained as tailor's cutters, has also become professional. New enterprises have arisen in the form of 'local trade', which moreover add 'colour' to the public space.

Offering a place in the market to different and especially lively gastronomic cultures leads to a form of appropriation of public space. As a result, the public space loses its supposed neutrality and, in Van Heewwijk's view, the feeling of 'belonging' is encouraged. Appropriation here should not be understood as the annexing of physical space, but as the subjectivization of public space by revealing what the ruling consensus – in this case, the pursuit of a clean, safe and manageable market – excludes. By making diversity and different interests explicit, a societal life comes to the fore that is much more diverse than what results from aiming for the common denominator, and that is precisely what Freehouse is all about.

Getting Away From the Norm

Like Apolonija Šušteršič, Jeanne Van Heeswijk has roots in community art and collaborative art practices, both of which have been under fire in the past several years. The manifesto *Too Active to Act* (2010) by Gideon Boie and Matthias Pauwels (BAVO) sharply criticizes such socially engaged art practices in the Netherlands.[1] They sketch a picture of artists who intervene in social processes as a result of the restructuring of problem districts and who try to combat the erosion of public space, but who neglect to examine the social failure of the underlying neoliberal policy, neither criticizing it nor coming up with alternatives. BAVO speaks of well-meaning artists who do not dare to show their teeth. Yet Apolonija Šušteršič managed to get away from the instrumentalized framework of her assignment, and both she and Jeanne van Heeswijk could complete their projects at their own discretion and in collaboration with newly formed groups. Šušteršič even succeeded in this despite a conflict with her commissioner.

A criticism conveyed in recent research on government-supported citizens' initiatives is that they are too unilaterally focused on 'joining in' in the sense of social participation, whereas joining the conversation or taking part in deciding about fundamental democratic matters such as the decision-making process regarding the neighbourhood or the design of public space hardly comes up for discussion.[2] Due to this lack of political participation, the possibility of filling up the 'democratic void' is missed.[3] In the Hustadt Project and Freehouse, however, control is persuasively built in from the bottom up, so that the instigation of social participation does not stand on its own, but is the basis upon which new political actors are formed. In Hustadt, residents were able to bring about the democratization of the area's development, and in Freehouse they blossomed into a serious party that functioned side by side with the borough and the housing corporation in the further development of the area.

As early as 2002, Miwon Kwon argued in her book on site-specific art in favour of artistic practices that propose and try out new forms of collectivity and belonging.[4] She investigated the homogenization of cities, which leads to the disappearance of the local, or the 'disappearance of site'. The problems of modernity that Kwon refers to – the loss of community ties and the 'human dimension', resulting in uprooting and alienation – lead to an increased desire for safety and control in contemporary cities, and that has certainly not grown less since then. The projects of Šušteršič and Van Heeswijk convincingly show how new forms of community and belonging can be developed and put to the test.[5]

Skulpturenpark Berlin Zentrum and ZKU

With Skuplturenpark Berlin Zentrum, presence in public space also forms the step towards participation in the public discourse, but unlike Van Heeswijk and Šušteršič's projects, here this is based on the autonomous production of art.

In March of 2006, Matthias Einhoff, Philip Horst, Markus Lohmann, Harry Sachs and Daniel Seiple founded the artists' collective KUNSTrePUBLIK in order to open the Skulpturenpark in November of that same year on a piece of land at the foot of the former fashion centre in which their studios are located. The terrain lies on the border between Mitte and Kreuzberg and until the fall of the Berlin wall was part of the militarized zone between East and West. In 2006, it was an urban void of some five hectares that had been wasteland for over 20 years.

KUNSTrePUBLIK threw open the fenced-off area and created the conditions for artistic experimentation. For a period of three years, they developed a programme of themed series, the first of which was devoted to exploring the historical, social and physical circumstances of the site itself. The invited artists created situations and sculptures that gave occasion to discuss the meaning of the spot and interpret it in new ways.

Skulpturenpark developed into a freely accessible urban platform where art projects introduce new tools and other ways of looking at things in order to examine and understand a place like this.

Moreover, by continually being involved with the terrain, the collective became increasingly established in the practice and the politics of the urban development in Berlin, which is guided by property, investment and speculation. In September 2007, the former fashion centre was sold to a foreign investor. When new buyers also showed interest in the rest of the terrain, the city held a closed competition among four renowned architecture firms for the development of the area.

In reaction, KUNSTrePUBLIK announced 'Land Reform', a programme about property and user's rights, and subsequently succeeded in becoming admitted to the competition as a fifth party. During 'User Days', the collective developed a proposal in collaboration with local residents and interested professionals that focused on the value of *Negativraum*, or 'negative space' – empty areas as (temporary) places that can be used by all residents. This was an outspoken plea for a more open form of urban development.

The sale of the terrain to the highest bidder meant the end of a programme that had contributed to a fascinating diversity on that spot by producing other kinds of 'spaces' and countervailing opinions. But this did not mean the end of KUNSTrePUBLIK's ambition to introduce a different line of thinking into the practice of urban planning. When shortly afterwards the city of Berlin called for proposals for the reuse of a former goods station in Moabit, KUNSTrePUBLIK turned in a plan for an independent centre for artistic production and research on the interface of art and urban development. Out of the 80 entries submitted, the Zentrum für Kunst und Urbanistik project was chosen. The collective could now build up an organization, which combined autonomous artistic production and research with residencies, and an intensive public programme on new forms of urban development.

In this same period, Dutch artist and urban curator Sabrina Lindemann decided to set up a knowledge platform as an extension of her years of practice in public space. On the basis of her broad experience with large-scale urban renewal processes, she also urged a form of open-source urban development by means of a flexible, open-ended organic planning process, with an eye to the qualities and possibilities of a particular spot. With architect Iris Schutten and the Rietveld Landscape agency, she set up the knowledge platform Tussentijd in Ontwikkeling, which argues in favour of the temporary use of empty buildings and wasteland as a vital strategy for urban development.

New Strategies

The ZKU and the knowledge platform are both aimed at influencing the prevailing thinking on urban development. In addition to their practices in public space, the organizations make networks available and offer room for participation in the public discourse. After years of having mainly operated in an ad hoc and tactical manner within a given circumstance, they can now develop more strategic ways of working. These are not limited to reacting, but create conditions for actively taking the lead and formulating a different kind of viewpoint, investigating that viewpoint and getting it on the social agenda.

In these divergent but as yet 'marginal' practices the meaning of the public domain in the city is being actively propagated, and other interpretations of openness, supported by new 'publics', are being given form. The initiatives are indebted to the ideas propounded as early as 1968 in the essay 'The Right to the City' by theorist Henri Lefebvre, in which he argued in favour of an urban development whereby user value is at least as important as monetary value. [6] The distinction between 'housing' and 'home' plays a prominent role in this: housing for city dwellers is one thing; their being connected with an area, actively

living in it and making it a home is another. As Lefebvre describes, these new practices play with the question of whom the city belongs to. A form of ownership becomes apparent that is not legitimized by economic or legal titles, but that comes from care and responsibility: an instinctive ownership on the basis of involvement, which makes an extremely constructive contribution to the public dimension of the areas concerned. These projects are thus much more than small-scale testing grounds for urban planning from the bottom up. Not only do they provide direction for the discourse on participation and ownership within the framework of urban planning, they also are a first move for a new relationship between citizens and the government.

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For more information on the above-mentioned projects, please see:

hustadtproject.blogspot.nl

www.freehouse.nl

www.skulpturenpark.org

www.kunstrepublik.de

www.zku-berlin.org

www.linkedin.com

www.rietveldlandscape.nl

www.optrektransvaal.nl

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Footnotes

1.BAVO, *Too Active to Act. Cultureel Activisme na het einde van de geschiedenis* (Amsterdam: Valiz Publishers, 2011).
2. Evelien Tonkens and Imrat Verhoeven, *Bewonersinitiatieven: proeftuin voor partnerschap tussen burgers en overheid. Een onderzoek naar bewonersinitiatieven in de Amsterdamse wijkaanpak* , Uva | Stichting Actief burgerschap, October 2011; I. Verhoeven and M. Oude Vrielink, 'De stille ideologie van de doe-democratie', in: C. Montfoort, A. Michels and W. van Dooren (eds.), *Stille ideologie* (The Hague: Lemma, still to be published).
3. Mandy Ridderhof de Wilde, *Bewonersinitiatieven in de Vogelaarwijkaanpak de Helling*, March 2010, published by the Scholarly Department of GroenLinks.
4. Miwon Kwon, *One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002).
5. Also see: Mark Schuilenburg, 'The Right to *Terroir*: Place and Identity in Times of Immigration and Globalization', *Open. Cahier on Art in the Public Domain,* no. 21 (Rotterdam: NAi Publishers in collaboration with SKOR, 2011).
6. Henri Lefebvre, 'The Right to the City' (1968). Republication in: idem, *Writing on Cities* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1996), 158.

Tags

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