TERRITORIES AS COMMONS:
New strategies for citizens empowerment
and the role of cultural stakeholders

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Cities are changing. City-life is changing. Living in the „Urban Age“ basing on the fact that more than 50 percent of people worldwide live in urban areas includes more than the fact of growing volume and gaining density cities. Least by migration-movements due to global unequality of essential resources and arising and forthgoing political conflicts within as well as between nations, cities are not only growing in number of inhabitants but becoming more diverse in an exploding dynamic. Tensions and conflicts along the borders of socio-economic and ethnic-cultural and political allegiance borders show up and are challenging city-societies in a very urgent way.

How should, how could transit cities nowadays be designed to support social justice and social peace? Very first thing to empower citizens to establish inclusive neighbourhoods is to continuously develop public infrastructure, which is allowing access to every citizen. Cities necessarily need infrastructure guaranteed by the community that is able to implement effective instruments to establish the maximum of social justice. On the other hand vivid neighborhoods are depended on a strong civil participation and engagement. This all needs a lot of space. Space for different ways of life that shouldn't disturb each other as well as space for community life, for communication, for interaction, supporting people getting to know another by chance as well as building up reliable relationships.

The role of cultural stakeholders is the highly sensitive perception of needs and creativity in developing impulses, ideas, concepts which can support people meeting, getting in contact with the other, the „alien“, and starting into communication and interaction. This is not multi-culti-romantism. This is the only realistic way. Cultural stakeholders are professional experts for a huge and sparkling variety of communication in many „linking languages“ as music, dance, performance, theatre, painting, photography, sculpture, architecture and many more. They are experts for supporting communication far off a monolingual habitus.

A central resource of meeting and communication between people outside of peer-context is the public space.

This means indoor-public-spaces like neighbourhood-centres or cultural centres as well as informal places outside as parks, river-promenades or central squares. Outside-public-spaces in European cities have a meaningful tradition. During the last two decades, though, there were changes in design and significance.
Former public space as railway stations or shopping malls by neoliberal deregulations turned to semi-private areas, which no longer give access to everybody. Not being potentially consumer or not behaving in an conventional manner can be reason enough to become excluded from semi-privat/public areas. Even from public spaces withdrawal of persons is everydays practice, as young skateboarders, street-musicians, ball playing children, drug addicts or homeless people can frequently experience. A fight of interests on public space between investors, passants, consumers and people who use public space for spending time without consuming is going on. New clean and fancy designs gave change to the perception of public space and meanwhile there seems to be a lack of empirical knowlege or experience of the living qualtity public space can offer.

„Whom does the city belong to?“ or „Reclaim the street“ are mottos of social movements, trying to restructure the function and use of public space. Some of the strategies became quite popular in the last years. Especially the Guerilla- and urban gardening movement established in cities worldwide. Combined with a variety of privat as public networks as Coworking and foodsharing, Couchsurfing and carpooling, Repair-Cafes and Knitting-Nites, open space bookshelves and exchange-parties for clothing are expressing not only a statement for a change towards more ecological and sustainable lifestyle but also can be read as a need for more socialising, more contact, more communication in order to make neighborhoods more personal and familiar.

In the following I will expose a variety of examples of dinner partys, which took place in public.

An invitation for dinner is something special anyway. At such a dinner eating food in general is not the first aim. The main object is to meet people in a friendly and relaxed atmosphere. Eating together can be very intimate, no matter if there are lovers at a rendez-vous, a festive family meeting, a dinner with friends, business partners at lunch or an international group of politicians at a gala-dinner. In a symbolic way sharing a meal together produces confidence. Taking place at a set table in a relaxed atmosphere signalizes the participants' interest to learn to know each other, to get into and remain in a positive contact. This may even gain significance if the gesture of „sharing a meal“ is used deliberately to overcome strangeness, differences or even conflicts.

I have chosen the medium „dinner party“ as my favorite in order to explore the qualit(y) and potentials of public space, because it is both: It is a friendly and generous gesture for itself, but transferring it into public space, it has a clearly demanding quality in making a statement about the democratic partizipation in common goods. This twisted message opens space for artistic-experimental playing and transporting a serious concern in one.

I will introduce you into some works of my students at the University of Ludwigshafen, who as future Social Workers are very interested in the inclusion of people especially living in difficult situations and see an important factor for inclusion within access to public space for all citizens.

Further I will show artistic-experimental as well as not so much spectacular but everyday practices of dinner partys in public space. What becomes obvious here is the crucial role, which cultural stakeholders have in identifying needs as well as resources in order to establish forms of gathering in public space as what its best aim is: Being used as a Common.
On a strip of grass between railway tracks and a street there is a table. It's a breakfast-table, set up with a white cloth, a blue coffee-set and an Espressomachine. An elderly lady is sitting at it. Through her sunglasses she is looking at the camera in a relaxed way. Two empty chairs and a stool invite to join her. In the background skyscrapers tower up against the sky. We are in Ostrava, Czech Republic's third largest city. A board in front of the table shows the purpose of the unusual setting: it is a “Permanent Breakfast”- intervention.

On May 1, 1996 a group around the artist Friedemann Derschmidt initiated the first breakfast in a public space in Vienna. It was the beginning of a performance that has continued for meanwhile 20 years. It works on the snowball-principle worldwide and so takes place “permanently”: an individual or a group of people invite for breakfast. Tables and chairs are put up, the tables are set, food is prepared. Passerbys are welcome as “guests by chance”. The action has two purposes:

- to have a nice time in a group of heterogenous people
- to try the quality of public space as a place for meeting and communication and to test public space with regard to its potentials.

The action gets its special charm by the idea to transport a normally private event like breakfast into public. The participants of such an action accept a sort of self-obligation to organize that kind of breakfast at another place of their choice within a short time-distance.

These interventions that continue to take place through the whole world are documented at [www.permanentbreakfast.org](http://www.permanentbreakfast.org). Here you will find pictures and Reports about experiences using public space in such an unconventional way from New York, Buenos Aires, Beirut, Kopenhagen, Valencia, Berlin, Oslo, Belgrad, Taichung (Taiwan) and many other cities.¹

Contrary to the worry of some people there isn't anything illegal in these interventions. In most countries you are free to put up a breakfast-table in a public place.² It's rather a matter of testing a kind of utilization of public space, of reflecting on personal perception as well as quality of public space in function of Common.

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1 Compare to Derschmidt, Friedeman: www.permanentbreakfast.org; (Date of calling the site 29.08.2016)

2 In most areas there are no restrictions as long as one does not hinder traffic, not damage floor or facades, not leave behind litter a.o. Decisive are juridical regulations of the local authorities.
Since the end of the noughties urban gardening projects started spreading all over Germany. Today one can find these green commons in just about every town in the country. Maintained by free and open communities you can experience young and old, families and singles, people with all kind of cultural background planting and harvesting with great enthusiasm and energy.

Planting gardens in abandoned building grounds and on car park roofs can be read as very much a political statement for less consuming, recycling and a more ecological and sustainable lifestyle. But it is even more than this. It has truly avant-garde quality in experimental settings in order to achieve more partizipation and more inclusion in urban neighbourhoods.

The picture above is showing urban gardeners from the Tempelhofer Feld celebrating Thanksgiving. The former airport „Tempelhof“ in the middle of Berlin had shut down in 2008. The huge area turned to be the largest and probably most famous urban gardening project in Germany. Since then there are tense conflicts between investors, the city-gouverment and neighbourhoods about the future of the area going on. The Urban gardening community is very aware and active in political debates about determining and using public space. The idea of the Almende is understood as a great value.

Cooking and dining together became a just about everyday practise in these contexts.
How “public” is public space? Does every citizen have access to these areas? Or are there restrictions against certain groups? Who is allowed to use the common good for his interests and who is not?

A group of students tried to generate knowledge about claims on public space by a series of performances under the main title: “How shall one behave on the Berlin Square?”. Week by week about 70 students were performing a specific question by acting it, for instance: Shall one play ball on the Berlin Square? Shall one touch each other on the Berlin Square? Shall one sunbathe on the Berlin Square? Shall one plant flowers on the Berlin Square? – and so on.

The series was orientated at the artistic form of a flash mob, respectively smart mob, as the students suddenly assembled, performed an unusual act and then dispersed again. And although it was an officially registered action, it made the local authorities somehow nervous and they sent police for controlling it.

While flashmobs often are meant for fun and entertainment, the term „smart mob“ is applied when it seeks the purpose of social activity or politic protest. Both forms are organized by social media and can be mobilized quickly. Compare to Rheingold, Howard: „Smart Mobs. The Next Social Revolution.“ New York: Basic Books 2007.
The story behind the students work can be told briefly and it stands for changes in function and using opportunities of public space within the last two decades in general.

At the end of the nineties the central area of the city was more and more discovered as lucrative site for investors. Architecture in modern urban design arose, traffic structure was improved, shopping malls occured and prices for housing climbed up. Low income inhabitants were forced to move away to the outside districts of town. When the Berlin Square in Ludwigshafen was renewed it did not take to long, though, that certain groups of people were attracted and started to spend time on the place: skateboarders appreciated the new pavement, members of the gothic-youthszene liked it as party-location, persons of the homeless milieu preferred spending time here, watching urban streetlife pass by.

Owners of shops and restaurants felt disturbed by these people and conflicts increased. At last the city council declared an enactment which for the concerned area forbid drinking alcohol or carrying bottles of glas outside of gastronomy. Around the year 2010 many cities in Germany declared this special enactment called „Gefahrenabwehr-Verordnung“ (a direct translation would be „Danger-Defense-Enactment“). This hit exactly those who did not have money to move into a cafe or in an bar. By this regulation, youngsters and poor people from now on were excluded from the Berlin Square.

Of course passerbys do not want to be bothered by anyone. But from a social perspective the enactment evokes critics on a policy of public space which strengthens commercial interests and excludes low income groups.

By questioning the function and use of public space performing it exactly there the students gave a strong impuls for discussing pros and cons among passerbys. In the local media an intense debate was initiated, people shared their personal experiences and opinions by readers letters.

In the nearby city Freiburg a student went to lawcourt against the similiar enactment. The judgement then was pro the openness of public space and the Freiburg city council was asked to withdraw their declaring.
Dinner Party II: „Invite a Person you know, who you meet regularly in daily life, but never yet have shared a meal with.“ Artists-collective „Kunstladen“ e.V. in Mannheim in October 2007
Inviting for Dinner in a conventional manner often starts with setting up a guestlist. That can be easy by simply following a wish by heart or an obligatious duty to spend time with friends, relatives, colleagues, neighbours.

As well it can be quite a sophisticated challenge, if there is a diplomatic purpose on mind. One then hasto decide whom to invite and whom not and how to arrange the group constellation.

The participative performance „Invitation. Dinner Party I-IV“ initiated by the artists-collective „Kunstladen“ in Mannheim experimented with the accustomed rules for dinner-invitations and tested new criteria for composing the guestlist.

A weekly dinner party was arranged. The members of the artists-collective as hosts had to bring somebody along. Following rules for choosing the guests were fixed:

Dinner Party I: Invite a person you know well and shared a meal with already (e.g. friend, colleague).

Dinner Party II: Invite a Person you know, whom you meet regulary in daily life, but never yet have shared a meal with (e.g. your parcel delivery service, your dentist, your bakersshop sales assistent).

Dinner Party III: Invite a Person you know by seeing only, you have never spoken to and never shared a meal together yet (e.g. someone distant in neighbourhood, school, work).

Dinner Party IV: Invite a Person, you never have seen and never talked to before and your first contact is this invitation for Dinner (e.g. a stranger on the street, in the supermarket, in the tram).

All four evenings turned out really special. Catering-Teams of friends prepared very nice course menu meals and the dinner partys took place in the location of the „Kunstladen“, so actually the one or other passerby came in and joined spontaneously.

While the first Dinner was a more or less homogenous group of academics, artists, designers and actors it were the rules of the following invitations which made it more challenging.

For Dinner III I personal asked a neighbour lady I knew by windowsight only. She said she would like to join but then actually did not come. This kind of experience all hosts made in a similar way: people reacted a little irritated and there were rejections also.

But as well there were people who really liked the idea and joined. The table-talk then also went about this experience of hosts and guests with one another. There was intensive reflection about conventions in city-life in the ambivalences of strangeness and familiarity, of private and public, of including and excluding, of homogeneity and diversity.

It was Dinner IV which made clear how much it is a specific german convention not to have contact to strangers on street. But having to invite a person, I „never have seen and never talked to before“ forced me to do so. In the end I found my guest in a laundrette. She had to wait for the washing to get done and had time anyway, so she came along.

At this evening there was a young girl, who told she is from ecuador and for one week in germany now. And that this evening really for her hit away the stereotype oft he Germans in general being rather distant. The Germans at the table were quite touched then.

What remained: In material form there are today 4 framed table cloths with the marks of Dinner Party I, II, III and IV. While eating and talking all members were free to sketch and write on the table cloth. The framed cloths are like a documentary of the project now.

In an idealistic dimension there remains a personal great experience and friendly relationships, some of them until today.

4 „Invitation. Dinner Party I-IV“ was initiated by the artist-collective „Kunstladen“ e.V. in Mannheim (2004-2010) around Andrea Lutz-Kluge, Gabriele Schofeld, Monika-Margret Steger und Lars Wibranski; www.kunstladen-mannheim.de
Since September 2015 more than 1000 refugees from Syria came to Ludwigshafen, which is a middle large town with about 160,000 inhabitants in the West of Germany. Providing shelter for so many people is quite a challenge for a community: Camps had to be put up, food, clothing and medical care had to be organized. This could have never been established so quickly if there hadn’t been hundreds of volunteers helping.

Citizens started maintaining second hand clothes, running Asyl-Cafes and Bicycle-Repairing-Workshops, teaching German language and organizing sport events and walking-tours through Ludwigshafen.

On the other hand there are citizens who feel strongly irritated about suddenly so many new strangers in town. They fear insecurity, they fear wage dumping, some fear the alien culture all through.

The students of Social Work are aware that this new situation will have strong impact on their future work for some next years. So again and again they were discussing concepts, of how to support processes of integration and inclusion within the town. One idea was to organize a dinner party in public space, inviting refugees and citizens of Ludwigshafen.

The students designed a flyer for invitation and spread it among passers-by in town. They announced in the refugee camp. They organized tables and brought them to the parking space right next to the refugees camp and prepared dishes for a buffet. It turned to be a great success. 200 people came, some brought chairs, almost everybody brought food: Citizens of Ludwigshafen, students and refugees had dinner. The Syrians later performed music and some guests started dancing.
Flyer spread among passerbys in town: Invitation to the parking space right next to a refugee camp.

OPEN DINNER
Thursday, 20th of April 2015 at 6 p.m. | on Messplatz in Ludwigshafen

If you can, bring a chair. If you like, bring some food.

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