

Cultural centres in Europe – a part of something larger

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In the wake of the economical crisis and growing globalization we experience a decrease in the engagement of democratic institutions in Europe. All over Europe the concept of “participation” is being used more frequently in an attempt to engage and involve citizens in society and democratic processes. But also the financial market and the cultural sector are trying to create new and stronger connections to the consumers by inviting to active participation in various activities. Therefore we can read about ‘audience development’, ‘consumer experiences’ and ‘co-creation’ but what we don’t know is what kind of participation these terms are actually referring to.

New knowledge about participation

However a new research project from the University of Aarhus in Denmark has studied the various forms of participation in European cultural centres and the results are showing that participation is practiced more often and in more extensive forms than the known definitions of participation would cover. This has motivated the researchers to create a new definition which indicates that the cultural centres interact with the citizens in order to create communities and to facilitate “something larger” through cultural activities.

New definition: In the investigated cultural centres participation is practiced as actions where centres and citizens relate in order to create specific or imagined communities and to facilitate (the potential of) change or “something larger” through cultural activities”

In connection to this definition it is concluded that the activities in the cultural centres are not isolated, self-contained events that exist for their own sake. Instead they are, implicitly or explicitly, practiced and understood as elements that create or facilitate various forms of progressive transformation – in and among individual citizens and local communities and sometimes also in societies at large.

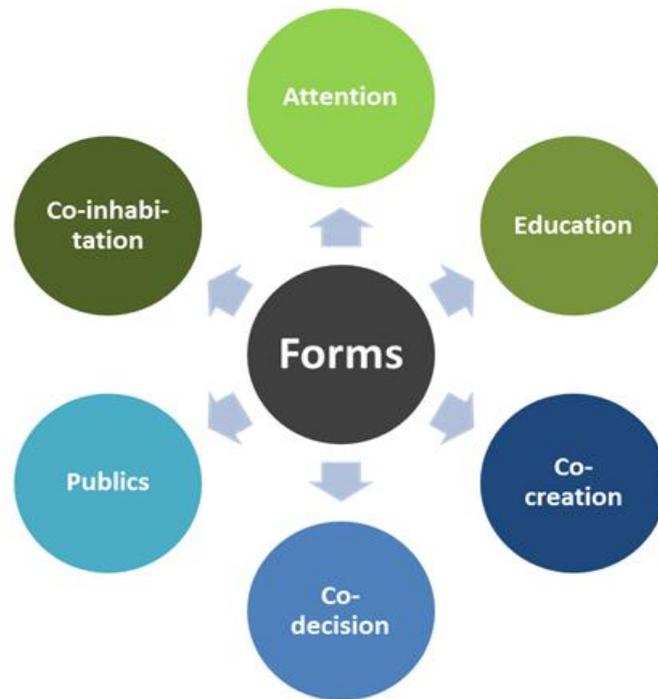
To strengthen, improve or change

It is also concluded that participation is an essential part of the cultural centres identity and self understanding and hereby the centres, as cultural institutions, are very special and unique since they often combine arts and creativity with a focus on diversity, civic engagement, involvement of volunteers and this even with a specific openness towards bottom-up initiatives. This is all executed by giving access to rooms, technical facilities, exhibitions, rehearsals, performances, concerts, workshops etc. and with a great variety of activities and different groups of users.

So the creation of communities and the functionality as facilitators towards the initiatives of the citizens are, according to the researchers, the overall common feature of the European cultural centres.

Not one but six forms of participation

As a consequence of the widened definition of participation, the researchers have also located and named six different forms of participation, enabling them to describe what it is that is actually going on in the cultural centres. (fig.1)



- 1) Attention:** Attending and paying attention to cultural activities together with (imagined) others (e.g. going to a concert, an exhibition or an outdoor cinema)
- 2) Education:** Taking part in learning activities (e.g. language, dance or art classes)
- 3) Co-inhabitation:** Sharing spaces together with other citizens or cultural agencies (e.g. making ceramics with others of the same interest, sharing space with artists in residence)
- 4) Co-creation:** Making specific objects, events or processes together (e.g. a festival, a performance or a wall of memories)
- 5) Publics:** Engaging in collective verbal or discursive interaction (e.g. a public meeting to discuss issues relevant to the neighborhood or a conversation with someone you might not have met elsewhere)
- 6) Co-decision:** Engaging in equal and shared decision-making (e.g. co-deciding what to do in a specific centre space or how to use other resources)

These six forms of participation are represented in all the activities of the cultural centres, but not necessarily with same amount or weight, and the researchers point out, that they don't value one kind of activity as better than the other. They also point out that one activity seldom stands alone, and that they – on the contrary – supports each other in different ways, and that the activity taking place varies in levels, in time, in scale from micro to macro and from deep to broad participation.

Important arenas for co-decision

Also the very origin of the activities varies - some are organized by the centres and others are created and organized by the citizens themselves. Regarding the participation form named "Co-decision", the researchers claim that when compared to other kinds of cultural institutions the cultural centres seem more open towards various forms of participation and interactive processes, and that makes them important arenas for publics and co-decision.

Not only positive effects

Like the different participatory forms the effects are very often connected to one another and often appear at the same time. In some cases all the effects can appear simultaneously, while in other cases there are only a few effects involved in the process. The researchers also mention that negative effects can occur since it's not all activities, projects or initiatives that are successful because the centres have very different opportunities and use very different methods when realizing projects and activities. Participation may cause conflicts when different participants have different goals, expectations or means, and it may be frustrating, time-consuming or disappointing, when the participants have different priorities, tastes, energies or resources. Or it may just simply be exhausting, because the ambitions are often higher than the resources at hand:

"The dark side of the cultural centres' volunteers, amateurs, civic engagement and bottom up-initiatives is that the centres depend on a lot of unpaid work, and that sometimes participation is rather a demand than a possibility", the researchers write, pointing their finger at facts, that are well known to everyone working in a cultural centre.

Four different kinds of cultural centres

Besides the new definition of participation, the 6 participatory forms and the nine positive effects the researchers have also found four kinds of cultural centres:

- 1) The one-(wo)man centre
- 2) The artist/activist group centre
- 3) The neighborhood centre:
- 4) The new creative city/regional hub

To people working with cultural centres in Europe it might be somewhat difficult to recognize their centre as one of the four types, since the diversity of the European cultural centres is enormous. But it might be more important that the researchers also pinpoint some of the strengths and weaknesses connected to the organization of each of the typologies. This means amongst others that autonomy and co-decision have better opportunities in a type 1) The One-(wo)man centre, than e.g. in a type 3) Neighborhood centre with public funding and influenced by and facilitating many partners. At the same time, there is of course an important element of economic uncertainty in the type 1 centre that will often limit the level of activities. But most importantly we now have tools enabling us to speak about cultural centres at a more detailed level and a tool to analyze and understand strengths and weaknesses connected to the different typologies of centres.

New development tools for everyone with an interest in participation

Last but not least the project is not only a research in participation, but very much also a project where participation has been integrated and used directly as a methodology. Thirty-eight cultural centres and twenty selected employees from cultural centres in fourteen different countries in Europe have actively been collecting the empiric material that the researchers have been working with. As a part of the methodology the twenty Recorders were trained in five different techniques before they were sent to cultural centres in other countries than their own. In combination with the six participatory forms and the 9 effects the project has developed a completely new and efficient tool to understand and develop participatory processes. In the association of Cultural Centres in Denmark and in the European Network of Cultural Centres we are working to exploit the new knowledge and the new tools, not only to improve cultural centres, but also to the benefit of any cultural institution with an interest in participation. Doing this we hope – just like the participants in the cultural centres – to contribute to the development of participation in culture and society and thereby also becoming a part of something larger.

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INFO:

- **RECCORD** – Rethinking Cultural Centres in a European Dimension
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- **Researchers from Aarhus University:** Birgit Eriksson, Carsten Stage og Camilla Møhring Reestorff
- **Also supported by:** Creative Europe, Cultural Capital Aarhus 2017
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Picture: Drumklub is an example of a user-driven activity from the cultural center Waschaus outside Berlin where the participants are not only attending a concert as audience but are actively drumming and playing together with musicians on the stage. Drumklub gave their first performance outside Germany when the RECCORD research results were presented at a conference in Aarhus in May 2017.

