

When I was invited to speak at the symposium Social Housing—Housing the Social I was quite delighted because the topic is very close to my heart. However, when I read that I was part of the session "Autonomous or Instrumentalized," I became slightly irritated. Why do we have to talk again about this binary position when, in my opinion, autonomy and instrumentalization are no longer oppositional strategies.

The title presumed that an autonomous outside position is still possible and that working together with different partners such as local governments, councils, or social housing organizations invariably means that the artist is going to be instrumentalized. My concern has more to do with how, working with my skills as an artist within the complexity of our cities, I can put myself to work in areas that are undergoing rapid change and that are under huge pressure from the forces of globalization. As Martha Rosler has suggested, we need to take into account ways in which people reclaim the right to their city, both politically and socially. As such, we have to look at our own artistic position as to whom we serve. How can I be an instrument that makes the right to produce our daily environment a possibility? I like being an instrument that works on self-organization, collective ownership, and new forms of sociability. I like being an instrument that enables all of us to occupy, the place in which we live.

Housing social change: learning collectively to take responsibility²

The current economic crisis, as well as the shifting of geopolitical boundaries and socio-cultural demographics, as a result of global urbanization, has generated numerous local zones of conflict. Many neighborhoods have become sites of contestation, into which different conditions of power are inscribed, where everything seems to be locked up by over-regulation, and where populist images prevail. People are increasingly becoming disinvested and excluded from their own environment. There is a serious disconnection between ordinary people and their government. The development of a city, however, is a collective process. In this regard, and despite the growth of

Martha Rosler, "The Artistic Mode of Revolution: From Gentrification to Occupation," e-flux Journal, no. 33 (2012).

2 The text for this essay was partly taken from my acceptance speech for the Leonore Annenberg Prize for Art and Social Change 2011 (New York, September 25, 2011). disconnection, the city can always be transformed, and there is a growing faith, by the various parties that deal with developing the city, in the potential for developing models and instruments that enable communities to participate in building their city. Yet this faith ignores the fact that their idea of transformation is being based rather naively on a harmonious concept of togetherness.

The public domain is made through the meeting, but more so through the confrontation, between people, cultures, and ideas. It is exactly in that confrontation that new ideas and social transformations originate. Public life is, but for a small part, oriented by the physical environment. Social, economic, and cultural processes are usually quite exclusive. Yet at the center of these processes, and especially at sites of contestation, cultural interventions are often the only way through which public engagement in these processes can be generated.

Enabling the individual or the community to participate in building the city means more than presenting them with a few choices. For this would mean that we could still only participate within the already established conditions, such as public comment channels or classical forms of protest, including demonstrations and standard complaint procedures. Offering only a range of choices is one last convulsion of the urban marketing idea that still views the citizen as a consumer. In fact it is precisely these conditions, the notions of how we wish and are able to live together, that we should be able to question again and again within this process.

Housing is not a product but a process! Yet, how can we make it an inclusive process? What kind of interventionist strategies and micro-political tactics do we need to make this process more inhabitable?

The question is whether we are capable of creating a place, and associated capacities, for public engagement—a public domain—where we could research, debate, and face up to confrontation and address one another as co-producers of the city? Can we make this arena of tension visible and create models that allow people to become participants in the process of visualizing the dynamics, complexity, and diversity of the city they live in and to collectively develop a narrative about the city in which everyone has a place? "Can alliances between politics and art, be imagined, tested, and based in practices that establish ... narratives for a democratic, post-national ... inclusive

society ...?"³ How can we re-engage and witness the invisible vectors of power that shape the territory, reorganize systems of urban development, and challenge the political and economic frameworks it produces?

It is exactly here that we have to learn collectively to take responsibility for the place we live in. We have to occupy these places and deepen, sharpen, or question their narrative, not as consumers but as creators. So that we can become players in our own surroundings, are able to act up, are active citizens. Cultural interventions are a form of urban acupuncture (hit and run tactics) that will allow the sensitive places in our society to emerge and the blocked relational energies flow again. It is therefore important to ask how an engaged practice will not only address issues through debates but can at the same time mobilize existing local, physical, and socio-cultural capital, and use it as the "performative" basis for a city under development. Here, the performative should be understood as a way to try to decolonize space, as a gesture or intervention that tries to create a space in which a diversity of individual projections might confront each other versus the projection of "the perfect life/good" by project/real estate developers and local governments, who are each time trying to abstract and colonize space in order to create a different image of the city. In other words, we have to find a different way to use existing and new cultural capital.

Engaging communities

An engaged practice should provide a platform for artist and non-artist exchange, for participation, and real/honest communication, that underpins a broadly supported, inclusive, and integral idea about living together in the community, as a condition or possibility for bringing about changes, and preferably improvements, in social structures.⁴ To intervene in such a way that the people who are participating can increase the number and

3 Gottfried Wagner, The Art of Difference: From Europe as a Cultural Project to EU Policies for Culture written with the cooperation of the European Cultural Foundation and Fritt Ord Foundation (London: Alliance Publishing Trust, 2011), 78.

My own lesson from practices about the contemporary state of the public domain is that it will require nothing less than making private public during this state of exception. intensity of their ties, may seem a simple act to perform. However, during the course of my practice, I have learned how difficult it can be to create in collaboration with a community and to depend upon that community's continued involvement for sustainability. It also involved all of us learning together how to take collective responsibility in order to make the information gathered operate significantly in the social and political context. These processes are always long and sometimes painful, as we have to learn about each other's ideas and different viewpoints.

For my practice, becoming part of the community and being part of the whole process of neighborhood change is key. We have to understand how, at a deeper level, we can face today's broken circuitry between people, culture, and the political process. Then the energy generated through people acting-out in their own environment will lead to a network of support, a critical reading of one's own surroundings, and an involvement in the changes that take place. This is a process of collective learning—about how to unleash the potential of people to engage with different creative energies for collective action in order to become a shaping force in our immediate environment.

We do this in order to actively encourage people to create an environment in their own territory in which they can "create, produce, disseminate, distribute, and have access to their own cultural expressions."5 We want to establish a place where people teach each other what it takes to become active citizens and where they take collective responsibility to produce change in order to make the processes work in a larger social-political context. For this to occur, it is important to not just offer a platform for good intentions, but to find ways to re-set the public value of urbanism as a contributor to greater solidarity, one that acts as a real public faculty that co-produces an alternative. For this we have to go back again and again to create an understanding of the public domain as a shared space, a space that everyone can contribute to and can change. This concept of the public domain means that we all have the right to an environment that creates opportunities to work and to live well.

5 See "Article 7—Measures to promote cultural expressions," United Nations: Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions 2005 (Paris, October 20, 2005).

Face Your World, Amsterdam, 2005-2011

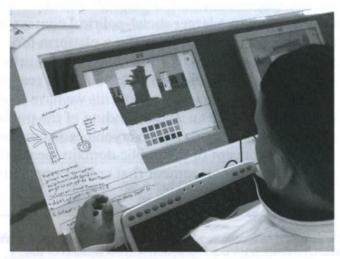
In a very intense and long-winded process, young people from Slotervaart, a district in Amsterdam, worked hard to rewrite the brief and, with that, the design of their neighborhood park. While the City Council wanted it to be a quiet green zone, the youngsters went to look for what the community really needed and introduced the concept of "Active Green," a green area that allowed for a variety of activities such as sport, play, and gathering for different generations and groups. Through the recognition of different points of view, they argued for the immediate needs of the community. In the end, this generated enough friction to change the political process. In 2011, their new park was opened.

Working on this project, I learned that when a community starts to articulate its own voice and aesthetic, and begins to self-organize, it quickly becomes apparent that it also knows what it wants and needs, and that in facilitating this process we might be able to pass on tools to reshape this world-in-progress. I work with "experts on location" because they live in an area, run a business, or have knowledge of the space and they see me as an instrument through which they can obtain the right to the place that they inhabit.

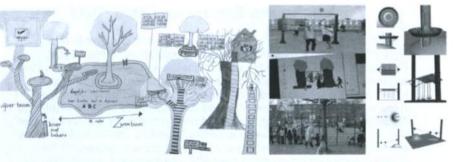




Presentation of park design by participants, 2006. (Photo Gert Jan van Rooij.) Presentation of preliminary design, 2006. (Photo Gert Jan van Rooij.)



Designing active trees in Face Your World game, 2006. (Photo Dennis Kaspori.)



Design process for active trees, 2006. (Spread Jeanne van Heeswijk & Dennis Kaspori.)



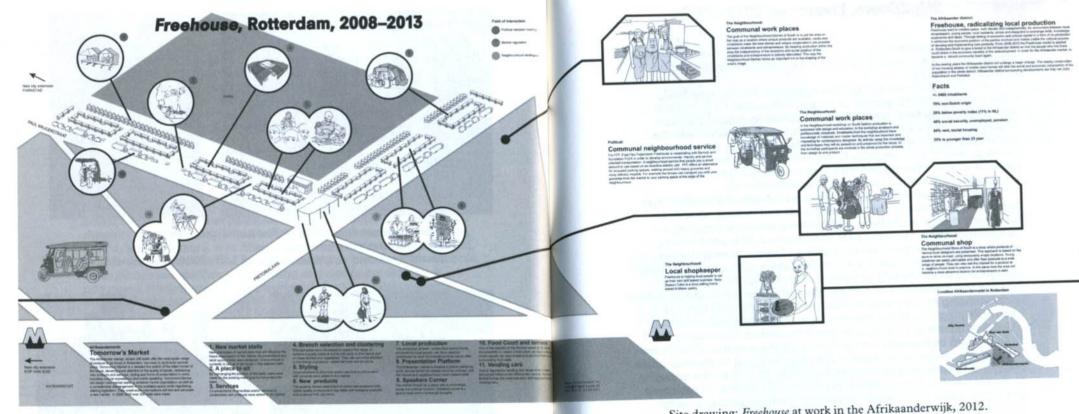
Design process for sportive paths, 2006. (Spread Jeanne van Heeswijk & Dennis Kaspori.)

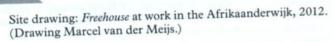






Active trees realized in Staalmanpark, 2011. (Photo Johannes van Assem.) Staalmanpark before *Face Your World*, 2005. (Photo Jeanne van Heeswijk.) Facilities in the completed Staalmanpark, 2011. (Photo Johannes van Assem.)







Presentation MO Magazine, 2011. (Photo Annet van Otterloo.)



Neighborhood kitchen at the market, 2009. (Photo Jeanne van Heeswijk.)

2Up2Down, Liverpool, 2010-2012

Housing is the battlefield of our time and the house is its monument. 2Up2Down is a monument built brick by brick, loaf by loaf by the

Anfield community.

It is a fundamental right to have a place to live in. In Anfield, Liverpool, next to the ground of Liverpool Football Club, several thousand homes have been emptied in order to rebuild the area. 2Up2Down is a project derived from workshop sessions with the community in this area to confront the issues facing the stagnated development of their neighborhood, with its failing housing market renewal, and to take matters into their own hands, to create a sustainable, affordable building and re-use scheme.

The project center is a former bakery opposite the stadium that has become the site for public discussion and debate, as well as for weekly design workshops and planning sessions focusing on its transformation. Over the past year, a group of around twenty young people have been working with architects to remodel the building to accommodate a community bakery with a training kitchen alongside a small housing scheme for two to four households. Treating the community as a client, the group has developed a deeper understanding of the needs of their own neighborhood and has been acquiring new skills. Meanwhile, a cross-generational group of local residents are developing the Homebaked Community Land Trust that will collectively own and operate the scheme. 2Up2Down encourages people of all ages in the neighborhood to develop urban design, architecture, and construction skills, as well as the capacity to develop social enterprises of their own. The number of residents getting involved grows week by week and all are gaining a better understanding of the housing regeneration process that is underway in their neighborhood and, importantly, acquiring the skills and confidence to play an active part in improving their surroundings and, with it, their life chances.



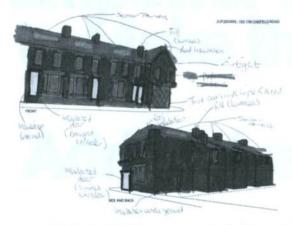


Anfield, 2010. (Photo Jeanne van Heeswijk.)
Project block of houses and former Mitchell's Bakery, 2010.
(Photo Jeanne van Heeswijk.)





Block modeling in clay, 2011. (Photo Marianne Heaslip, URBED [Urbanism, Environment and Design] Ltd.)
Real size modeling with URBED, 2011. (Photo Jeanne van Heeswijk.)





Ecological building material, 2011. (Photo Marianne Heaslip, URBED [Urbanism, Environment and Design] Ltd.)
Homebaked Development Agency poster, 2011.





Skills training, 2011. (Photo Jeanne van Heeswijk.) Setup session for the Urban Land Trust, 2010. (Photo Jeanne van Heeswijk.)