

17. Reclaiming Subjectivity through Urban Space Intervention – The People’s Architecture Helsinki

Urban environment is cut through several institutional practices such as political, economic and legal exercise of power, control and security. It is a space that is inhabited by a wide range of actors, interests and goals, as well as rules, structures and practices that govern them. Urban space is not a predetermined order but a relative space–time that evolves and becomes re-structured and created in a polemical relationship between different actors, interests and goals. It is much defined according to what, where and when is legitimate and to whom. Urban space is according to Ari Hirvonen a ‘normal space for normal’ (Hirvonen 2011: 297) in which specific areas are allocated for consumerism, production, transportation, passage, work or free time. Thus, it is much an institutionally defined hegemonic space, and as such it is never a neutral one. At the same time, urban space is also an open space of being and of temporary margins – a space of imagination, poetry, lingering and dreaming – a city of potentialities. Whether a city is through and through an administrative space managed by order and security principles, or a lively scene for activities and events for its citizens to claim their right for their city, is a political question (see Lefebvre [1966] 1996; Harvey 2012). By claiming public space for our own use, we challenge its conditions, definitions and uses and keep producing new ones.

Taking as a premise Henri Lefebvre’s thematizations of the citizens’ ‘right to the city’ and the ‘revolutionary urban tactics’ advocated in his writings (Lefebvre [1966] 1996), I look at the role of art’s interventional tactics in challenging the so-called normative consumerist-administrative-utilitarian order in urban space. Lefebvre acknowledges urban space not only as a sphere saturated with governance, industrial processes and capital accumulation, but argues that it is an ‘oeuvre of its citizens – a work of art that is constantly being made anew’ (Lefebvre [1966] 1996: 117; see also Butler 2007: 214). Linking the Lefebvrian premise together with interventional means by means of art and architecture, and Jacques Rancière’s line of thought on emancipatory politics focusing especially on his politics of *subjectivation*¹ – I ask: What kinds of emancipatory means may open up through scenographic activities, such as spatial interventions in urban space?

Through the lens of recent scenographic thinking where what scenography *does* is highlighted (in contrast to what scenography *is* or *represents*) (see, for example, Hann 2019), I look specifically at a case that I consider to hold emancipatory and inclusive potential by means of interventional spatial practices: a recent public art installation project called ‘People’s Architecture Helsinki’, which took place in the heart of the city of Helsinki in autumn 2017. I see the project both as an intervention that liberated public space from its given purposes and, further, as an emancipatory process of the so called ‘non-haves’ – in this case a group of asylum seekers, paperless individuals, *sans-papiers* – who responded to the architect’s open call and came to participate in the intervention. I consider the ‘People’s Architecture Helsinki’ installation as an example of an event and a performative act where the claiming one’s right for space, staged by citizens and other volunteers, most of whom were a group of asylum seekers, becomes concretized.

People’s Architecture was a design project initiated by the Taiwanese architect Hsieh Ying-Chun.² The shelter project was part of the Helsinki Design Week (HDW) city installations programme. Even though the project was commissioned by an institutional operator such as the HDW, I see it as an intriguing example of bringing together parties who operate in different fields – in this case, arts, architecture and social activism. A specific participatory potential is inherent to this project, in a way that leaves undefined who eventually may or is to participate in the process – thus it remains an open and democratic process.

Hsieh has conducted several post-disaster reconstructions in Taiwan, China and Southeast Asia in the past nearly twenty years. He facilitates projects for building dwellings for minorities and disadvantaged members of society, often times realized collectively with the local communities. Facing often difficult social, geographic or climatic conditions of each project, Hsieh has initiated three key principles for commencing his work: collaboration, adoptability and affordability in terms of technology, and that each project aims to remain an open system. It is said that ‘more than an architect, he is an architectural activist who takes social, cultural and economic limitations and ecological concerns into account to create works that embody the ideals of “sustainable construction”’ (Anonymous n.d.: n.pag.).

The ‘Helsinki project’ involved installing a transitory dwelling in Helsinki city centre. Hsieh launched an open invitation for citizens to join and share the collective

responsibility in building a temporary shelter. Over 30 asylum seekers responded to the call. Over the course of ten days, the temporary shelter was installed on *Three Blacksmith's square*, one of the most centrally located sites in the city. Adjacent to the square lie the classiest department stores in the city, surrounded with the most elegant book stores and fashion boutiques. The site is a perfect example of a socio-economically coherent, gentrified downtown location designed to be attractive for middle class tax payers and tourists. As such, it is also an exclusionary space to the marginalized urbanites such as the homeless, the paperless and the asylum seekers (Galanakis 2008: 243).

Societal backdrop

To outline the societal backdrop of the moment of Hsieh's project taking place in Helsinki, I briefly elaborate on the political tensions that had come to fill the public debate and media space in Finland around that particular time. In 2015, a record number of asylum seekers had arrived in Finland as a result of the 'refugee crisis'.³ For a country having been used to receiving only about a thousand refugees yearly, it seemed to be an overwhelming number and caused a sudden and aggressive rise of far-right nationalism. As the political climate in the country had suddenly turned into a scene reminiscent of the 1930s Europe, it is clear that I cannot but help looking at the 'People's Architecture Helsinki' also as a sensitively designed gesture of humanitarian activism. The project manifests a simultaneous empathy and empowerment, performed in a landscape contaminated by at-that-time particularly harsh, hard-white xenophobic atmosphere.

Many of the asylum seekers, who responded to the architect's invitation, had at that point another ongoing project in their own name elsewhere in the city centre – namely, the 'Right To Live' standing demonstration. This long-term event, led by the asylum seekers, stood for the call for more just legal refugee policies than were executed by the Finnish Immigration Services, which at that time was operating out of a right-wing government. What the asylum seekers urged for were nothing more than human rights policies that would far better respect the international agreements that Finland is (and was) committed to.⁴ The 'Right To Live' demonstration brought together a large community of supporting citizens, allies and open-border activists. This one-year-long human rights' public space stage was run and operated by the asylum seekers themselves. Their actions and activism resonates, for me, with Rancière's ideas of equality at work. At the very core of

Rancière's elaboration of the concept of equality lies the question concerning subjectivation, of becoming a collective subject of one's equality amongst all others and thus refusing any straight-forward categories or identifications as the 'excluded' or 'other'.⁵

fx1

fx2

Figures 17.1 and 17.2: People's Architecture Helsinki in-process.

People's Architecture as a scenographic intervention and an emancipatory project

I look at the case of the *People's Architecture* from two perspectives: as a scenographic and artistic intervention taking place in a gentrified public scene *Three Blacksmith's Square* at the very centre of Helsinki, and as a process of what we may call, in the light of Rancière's emancipatory ideas, equality at work (see, for example, Rancière 2014: 3–5, 80–81).

Looking at the *People's Architecture* as an intervention from a specifically scenographic perspective, I ask: How can scenographic practice challenge the habitual use of urban space? Today's conceptions of the expanded scenographic practices stress scenography as an agency of active (and activating) spatial dramaturgy, which – in a parallel manner as in the discourse of arts in a more general sense – has activated the role of the spectator in a profound manner (see, for example, McKinney and Palmer 2017). Performance and performance space is ever more strongly understood as an evental space and as a space of transformation, whereas the traditional conventions of scenography formulated scenography (and the task of the scenographer as a maker of) a visual, conceptual and spatial interpretation-tool of a dramaturgical text (see for example Hannah 2019; Loukola 2014). Contemporary scenographic practices have been articulated in terms of situation, transformative experience and action, and they are no longer aimed towards representative constellations of physical objects and metaphorical images. In her recent book on *Beyond Scenography*, Rachel Hann (2019) emphasizes the question of 'what scenography *does*' over the question of what it *is*. This, in its

appearance small, yet quite significant change of perspective describes clearly the shift in scenographic practices from interpretive and pictorial, to active and evental.

The *People's Architecture* intervention can be seen as a manifestation of certain inclusive (vs. exclusive) scenographics that make the subjectivation of the political migrant figure emerge and appear. This does not mean that the migrant figure magically turns into a political subject alone, but rather, the subjectivization process reveals the paradoxical co-existence of both the institutional and the governmental order (s/he *is* still a paperless person in the eyes of the administration) yet the possibility of appearing as a subject of one's own cause becomes manifest through the event and act of 'taking one's matter in one's own hands' (the *act* of subjectification). On this emancipatory setting, the existence of the *sans-papier* is as if split into a theatrical double existence: s/he is no longer merely the excluded, passive figure with no say on the society, a *have-not*, but, through the act of participating in the intervention s/he at the same time actively plays a leading role through making visible the spatial, social and political transformation from migrant figure into a citizen of this city, in this particular place and event.

From the point of view of an urban space intervention, the project poses a question about to whom does the city belong. Similarly, the *People's Architecture* challenged the prevailing conditions and social structures of the site of its erection, the *Three Blacksmiths Square* (Jensen et al. 2018: 127). In arts, interventions are site and time-specific actions that typically break the traditional expectations of presenting or performing art. Among other things, an intervention may challenge the notion of spectatorship 'by injecting something new and surprising into the familiar and existing' (Jensen et al. 2018: 11–12).

Rooted within several moments in the history of arts, such as Dadaism, Surrealism and the Situationist movement, intervention questions both the institutionalized and everyday life that shape our lived experience in a capitalist society. Place, as a concept and as a concrete physical space, has a central role in any intervention. Silvia Jestrovic calls this an *inter-performativity of place*, and notes that many public urban spaces can be associated with collective memory (Jestrovic 2013: 40; see also Jensen et al. 2018: 15). As such, interventions have a potential to challenge and alter these experiential expectations as well as to create a collective and participatory performance.

Furthermore, since public space interventions are not always realized inside (art) institutions, they are practices that can come to critique the institutional practices from yet another angle. In this sense, artistic interventions can be seen as part of the *post-studio* practices in arts such as socially engaged performances, and other collaborative and participatory practices. Claire Bishop calls these kinds of interventional tactics ‘modes of action in which engagement is part of a politicised method’ often with a focus on the creation of situations that have references to wider societal and political contexts (Bishop 2012: 1–2).

Second, following the Rancièrian line of thought, I argue that on both of the urban stages presented in this article – the *People’s Architecture* intervention and the *Right to Live* – demonstration – that both projects challenge the production of hegemonic space through re-constituting these sites as stages for political acts and of subjectivization. As Rancière suggests, there is porousness in the line between ‘us’ and ‘others’ which can be dissolved through the creation of dissensual space – a shared space of disagreement where different ‘normalcies’ may come into encountering without the necessity of reaching a consensus (Rancière 2014: 2–5, 42, 71–72, 143–144; see also Mouffe 2013, 2005).

Further, it needs to be addressed very clearly that for Rancière, the process of subjectivation is an enactment of (an already existing) equality – or, the handling of a wrong – by people who form a collective, a togetherness, to the extent that they are in an in-between position in society (Rancière 1992: 63; see also Rancière 1999: 15, 34–35). What is *not* at stake in this process, is the becoming to a (singular) *self* but rather, a moving from the position of an outsider to that of an in-between – of humanity and inhumanity, or of citizenship and its denial, of the status of a man of tools and the status of a speaking and thinking being.⁶ In everyday language, this might be rephrased in terms of taking action into one’s own hands and a refusal of straightforward categorizations such as ‘them’ (vs. ‘us’), the ‘excluded’ or the ‘other’. The *People’s Architecture* intervention tackles the notion of citizenship – via the participation of the *sans-papiers* – and makes migration a public concern and visible as a political, humanitarian and cultural issue that cannot be excluded from the sight of the society.

Scenes of equality

Both the visible and manifest, but also the underlying yet powerful connotations and dimensions in the practices of space played a significant role in the process of entering the sphere of political subjectivation, in the process-of-becoming a political subject through the architectural intervention realized in the *Three Blacksmith's Square*. It needs to be addressed that the process of subjectivation is by no means a straightforward one; it always denies any given identity as it is profoundly a heterological, plural – or as one could say, collective – process. ‘It is the formation of a one that is not a self but is the *relation of a self to an other*’ (Rancière 1992: 60).

How, then, did the *People's Architecture* enable or enhance an emancipatory process in the *Three Blacksmith's Square*? As a political performance and as an interventional process that temporarily rewrote the *Three Blacksmith's Square* anew, the intervention can be seen as one particular molecule of many in a larger emancipatory process. The emancipatory potential of the *People's Architecture* project became manifest as *political* event of subjectivization for all those who were involved in the intervention as participants, artists, pass-byers and spectators. It showed how an event of architectural activism can open up a scene for activating and demonstrating equality at work. The group of some thirty people, most of them asylum seekers, collectively framed a space of their own, by and for themselves but also for any one citizen who wished to enter that shared space. Through this particular event, the process of equality for all became in my analysis validated.

Urban space is saturated with various material means defining its formation and means of use through a number of administrative institutional practices and regulation, which also include a variety of ‘soft’ legal instruments and practices. Art, but also urban law manifests itself in material dimensions – in architecture, walls, squares and thoroughfares. In the case of *People's Architecture*, one comes to also acknowledge the materiality and embodiment that plays an important experiential role in urban place-making.⁷ The temporary shelter was built of easily accessible, affordable wooden bars and plywood. The structure was simple and minimalistic and designed so that the shelter was open and accessible from all sides. Podestas and other seating places around the

construction were inviting to get closer and get in contact and talk to the other people hanging around the shelter. For someone whose life is nowhere near being in need for a roof above your head or any shelter reminiscent of a ‘home’, the experience perhaps served as a vehicle for being able to connect to homelessness in one step more concrete and embodied manner than when reading an article about it.

The *People’s Architecture*, seen from the viewpoint of an interventional scenographic operation and as such a performative event, constructed as a polemical space by transforming a designated public square into a shared space of dissensus. As a temporary shelter, the spatial framing that resulted from the *People’s Architecture* project was performed as an intervention with the normative institutional order of the city. Following Rancière’s vocabulary: it reconfigured – or better yet: materialized – the existing *distribution of the sensible* in the urban space.⁸ In this way, the scenographic event formulated a new theoretical gesture that is inherently a political one.

Towards claiming right for the institutional urban space and making it for everybody’s

Cities have the capability of providing something for everybody, only because, and only when, they are created by everybody.

(Jacobs 1961: 238)

Without a more specified definition of *who* are we addressing as possessors of their right to the city – this *right* in itself is hardly more than an empty signifier, for it all depends on who is (the subject of) claiming this right. In the light of the *People’s Architecture* project, it becomes clear that is a different story for a regular city dweller than it is for a *sans-papier*. Furthermore, when one is concerned with marginalized neighbourhoods and those who have no part in the urban space, one must be careful not to repeat the inequalities of the urban space by treating those people as incapable to act in their own name and by themselves. The purpose of any ‘emancipatory project’ ought not to be to *donate* voice, rights, spaces, places or art to ‘them’ but to see those who do not have a voice in the society as capable to act and create by themselves in the name of the wrong done to them by the legal, social, political and economic order. An emancipatory project such as the *People’s Architecture Helsinki* reached out to make the

urgency of human rights visible, by designating free public space and guaranteeing public access for every citizen. By doing so, it opened up a potential scene of equality in the urban space. While in the city, an institutional order is established and inequalities are created, at the same time, opportunities for emancipation and democratization are opened up. As a network of subjects, places, events, emergences and imagination, urban space channels the needs, interests, desires and estuaries of all its users. But before everything else, the city is and needs to be created by *everybody*.

Acknowledgment

The chapter is dedicated to the memory of Ari Hirvonen (1960–2021).

Notes

¹ A note related to the varying translations of the term: Rancière himself uses in French the form *subjectivation*, but in the English translations the spectre varies. You can find at least these forms: *subjectivation* (which I use in this article, as it seems to refer to the process of *becoming-of-political-subject* in the least non-ambiguous way), *subjectivication*, *subjectifization* and *subjectivization*.

²<https://universes.art/en/venice-biennale/2009/tour/taiwan/04-hsieh-ying-chun/>. Accessed 22 February 2022.

³A total of 32,476 people according to the statistics from the Ministry of the Interior Finland Migration site: <https://intermin.fi/en/areas-of-expertise/migration/refugees-and-asylum-seekers>. Accessed 22 February 2022.

⁴Finland is committed, by international agreements, to providing protection to those in need. The basis of this is the 1951 Geneva Refugee Convention and other international human rights treaties and EU legislation. See the Ministry of the Interior Finland Migration site: <https://intermin.fi/en/areas-of-expertise/migration/refugees-and-asylum-seekers>. Accessed 22 February 2022.

⁵Rancière writes:

The logic of (political) subjectivization [...] is a heterology, a logic of the other [...] It is never the simple assertion of an identity; it is always, at the same time, the denial of an identity given by an other [...]. [...] it is a demonstration [...] and a staging of a common place that is not a place for a dialogue' for, according to Rancière 'there is no consensus, no settlement of a wrong.

(Rancière 1992: 62)

⁶ The logic of political subjectivization, of emancipation, is a heterology, a logic of the other, for three main reasons. First, it is never the simple assertion of an identity; it is always, at the same time, the denial of an identity given by an other [...]. Second, it is a demonstration, and a demonstration always supposes an other, even if that other refuses evidence or argument. It is the staging of a common place that is not a place for dialogue or a search for a consensus [...]. There is no consensus, no undamaged communication, no settlement of the wrong. But there is a polemical commonplace for the handling of a wrong and the demonstration of equality. Third, the logic of subjectivization always entails an impossible identification.

(Rancière 1992: 62)

⁷The term ‘place-making’ has been actively used by urban planners and activists since the 1990s, yet the thinking behind *place-making* is influenced by trailblazers of urban planning development such as Jane Jacobs already from the 1960s on. Jacobs was one of the first ones to advocate the idea of cities for people, not for just cars and consumption.

⁸Rancière defines ‘police’ as an organizational system that ‘establishes the distribution of the sensible’ as a law that separates communities and people into groups, social positions and functions; ‘police’ thus aims at maintaining a hierarchical order through an administrative power that categorizes communities and people into those who have, belong and are heard in the frame of the *police* order – and, vice versa, into those who have not, and are not heard. ‘Politics’ breaks or interrupts this normative order, yet it never aims into a consensus but rather into making way for a shared space where within any community it is more than welcome to disagree – and not fall into a consensus that evaporates all sensibilities and differences. Chantal Mouffe speaks, in terms of agonism, of the importance of maintaining a shared space where different parties can collaborate, in disagreement, non-consensually – as ‘adversaries’, not as ‘enemies’ (see Rancière 2014, 1999, 1992; Mouffe 2013, 2007, 2005).

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