

The House of Open Gates:

An Enclave Between the City of Graz as it is, and as We Imagine it Could be

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Abstract

In the middle of the so-called *migration crisis* and in face of neoliberal politics leading to an astonishing rise of fascism and xenophobia worldwide, cultural producers and artistic communities are responding with an intensification of critical discourses, artistic strategies and spatial tactics – that foster inclusion, social cohesion and empowerment of migrant populations towards mutual respect and acknowledgment of the richness of multiculturalism and diversity. Within this context, this article will examine a particular project named *The House of Open Gates* that took place in the city of Graz, Austria, in the autumn of 2016. This project was part of the *Steirischer Herbst Festival*, entitled *Narratives from the Arrival City*. In this article I would like to make a short expedition between my artistic position (as a member of the curatorial and artistic team) and the used tactics, while addressing both the process in which *The House of Open Gates* was conceived and how it became a temporary space of openness and otherness in the city of Graz.

Keywords: Migration, Dialogical Practices, Hospitality, Empowerment, Inclusion

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Introduction

In the middle of the so-called *migration crisis* and in face of neoliberal politics leading to an astonishing rise of fascism and xenophobia worldwide, cultural producers and artistic communities are responding with an intensification of critical discourses, artistic strategies and spatial tactics→ that foster inclusion, social cohesion and empowerment of migrant populations towards mutual respect and acknowledgment of the richness of multiculturalism and diversity. Within this context, this article will examine a particular project that took place in the city of Graz, Austria, in the autumn of 2016. This project was part of the *Steirischer Herbst Festival*,¹ which this year borrowed the famous quote from German Chancellor Angela Merkel “*Wir schaffen das*” [We can do this] to be the Festival’s leitmotiv, subtitled “*on the Shifting of Cultural Cartographies*.”

The *Steirischer Herbst* commissioned curators Anton Lederer and Margarethe Makovec from ‘rotor’ center for contemporary art to conceive and produce the festival’s central project, entitled *Narratives from the Arrival City*. As an artist working with participatory dialogical and collaborative spatial practices, I have been initially invited to be part of a think tank composed of 10 other artists and cultural producers to conceptually frame this space within the political context of the festival, of the city and beyond. Throughout this process, I became directly involved in the conceptual and physical design of one of the venues of the festival, named *The House of Open Gates*, in and around the Volksgarten Pavillon. In this article I would like to make a short expedition between my artistic position and the used artistic tactics, while addressing both the process in which *The House of Open Gates* was conceived and how it became an actual space of openness and otherness in the city of Graz during this particular short but intense timeframe (24/09 – 16/10/2016).

Imagining the Arrival

The development of the project lasted a year, involved various people, collaborations and debates which were spinning around ‘rotor’s expertise in socially engaged artistic practices and community work, particularly relevant in the neighbourhood it is located. The *Annenviertel*,² or the west bank for the Mur River, was chosen for the *Steirischer Herbst Festival* due to its historical connection to migrant movements in the city of Graz, with the *Annenstraße* being the main axis that connects the city center to the train station, and the Volksgarten as the “most problematic” park of the city, like it is often stigmatized by the local media.

The particular multicultural flair of this area is one of the main “subject matters” of ‘rotor’ gallery, and part of its curatorial program focuses on the construction of a “neighbourhood without borders.”³ During their 20 years of work in the area, they have nurtured a network consisting of various associations and initiatives that are connected to migrant backgrounds, but also to projects that sustain cosmopolitan atmospheres of conviviality that this particular area offers, in contrast to the east river bank, or to the other areas of the city that are clearly, not yet, so mixed. This network was the base of the program that filled *The House of Open Gates* with vitality and content, that brought the public and ideas for discussions.

Another central inspiration for *The House of Open Gates* was a project entitled Samovar Activity Café, initiated in a collaboration among ‘rotor’ and The Daily Rhythms Collective, a female artist collective that I am part of. The project started with the escalation in numbers of refugees entering Europe in the summer of 2015 and ran for one year, up to the beginning of the *Steirischer Herbst Festival*. The format is a pop-up café that goes to refugees’ houses, to ‘rotor’ or public spaces offering a comfortable atmosphere for people to spend time together, sharing food, skills and talents. In this one year run, the project worked mainly with one particular group of newcomers from Syria and Afghanistan living in Graz-Neuhart, and through this long-term relationship it enabled the possibility of creating mutual trust in a safe environment.

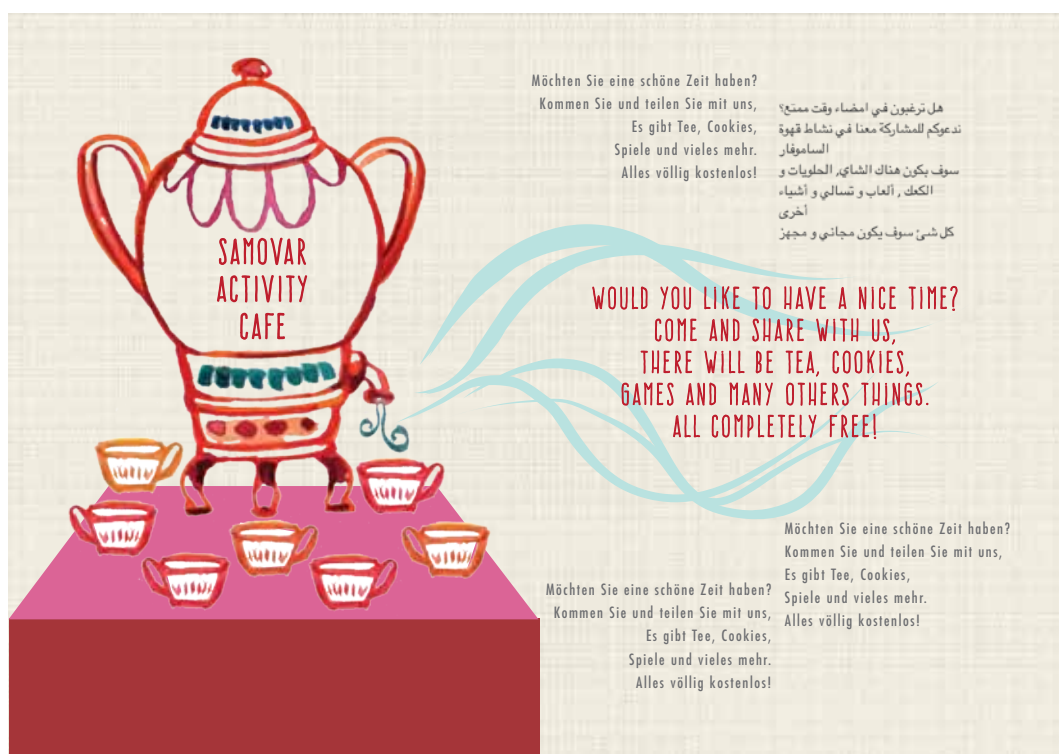


Figure 1. Invitation for the project.

The intimate experiences of exchange enabled by the *Samovar Café* were rich and inspiring, although with very little infrastructure and material means, but a lot of warm-hearted involvement of participants, which created a very lively atmosphere. One main feature was the multigenerational factor: both, the groups of “local artists” as well as the “newcomers,” brought family members to join the activities, and the activities and the spatial configuration were welcoming for all ages. This set-up not only increased the liveliness of the event, but also made it more cosy and trustful, as it felt like a somehow big family festivity somewhere in the country side. Yet this big family has people from various countries, they do not all speak the same languages (which is rarely a problem for children), they have different perceptions and interests, but they intensively enjoy the time together while exchanging skills, ideas and beautiful gestures.

Learning from this experience, which was happening once every one or two months, I decided to intensify the relationship by bringing the “community” formed by the *Samovar Café* together with another “community,” namely the Architecture students from the bachelors course⁴ I was facilitating in the summer semester 2016. After a preparatory research month with the students, we invited the newcomers to attend our course at the university once a week for two months and, together with the Architecture students, discuss and experiment with possibilities for creating a “multigenerational and multicultural gathering space.” This was an important step in the participatory process of designing the *Arrival Zone*, while simultaneously expanding the dialogue among social groups that not so easily meet.



Figure 2. Guests from Afghanistan and students having a conversation about “living spaces” with drawings/ without language translation at the classes in the Institute of Contemporary Art – TU Graz.

Designing the Stay

Coming from our own experiences and best practices worldwide, we focused on how to make the *Arrival Zone* a welcoming and comfortable place, how to spatially intervene in the Volksgarten Pavillon with a low budget but with a maximum level of participation and engagement from different actors. Obviously, to design the space means to be in a complex political negotiation, not only between the overlapping and even conflicting visions of the participants of the think tank and the organizers of the festival, but also from the users of the building,⁵ the users of the park, the rigid rules of municipal regulation on public spaces and public events, and the other actors invited to run specific programs and activities.

As an artist and architect I understood my role was to amplify the impact of the projects intentions already in the preparatory design phase and including as many different actors as possible, building upon the amazing network ‘rotor’ has nurtured for so many years, the richness of the population that inhabits the Annen-viertel, while enlarging the group by bringing contributions which were outside of this “geographical area” at first. In this sense, the design was developed in a collaborative process that simultaneously made visible some of the existing handcraft associations working with migrant populations (Heidenspass, NIL) and ethically engaged shops (Gea, Ethic Chic, Sammen Kohler, Reihany), but also would initiate dialogues among invited architects, artists, social workers, refugees, asylum seekers and students.



Figure 3. Applying the drawings and words into embroideries and T-shirts.

In this way, we focused on the idea of *transcultural domesticity*, in order to enable *The House of Open Gates* to become an example of *radical hospitality* in the city of Graz, both an interventionist and a representational approach towards a politics of alterity: to create a space of radical togetherness, while stressing the urge to create and maintain such spaces in a long-run.

This triggered a set of questions: How to conceive a neutral yet diverse space that is homelike to a public of various ages, social and cultural backgrounds? How can a space foster unlikely encounters? Could that be a starting point for dialogues and relationships to evolve? Moreover, could such space empower people who have been socially stigmatized and/or marginalised to become part of a wider community? Can a space allow mutual respect to grow into a(n utopic) feeling of egalitarianism? If Bruno Latour⁶ suggests that the social can be reassembled not in a society but in a collective could this temporary collective of participating people make a difference in the process of reassembling the social?

The House of Open Gates Comes Into Being

A small sign could be read in the entrance:

Welcome in the House of Open Gates
Take off your shoes
Take your time.



Figure 4. Welcoming in the *The House of Open Gates*.

Taking off the shoes is a gesture of respect, of slowing down the pace, recognizing the importance of the space other than a place to quickly go through, as it happens in many exhibition spaces. Not only because of the sign, but in response to the shoes previously taken off, all visitors almost automatically removed their shoes, signifying the space called “House” as a home, but a collective one. *Taking time* was in fact the central feature. One should allow him/herself to take time and be open to what happens, to go with the flow. But how to design the flow? How deep can people immerse in an activity and/or in a discussion? Do we need everybody’s attention all the time? Which are the possible simultaneities? Fully programmed spaces, with lots of activities and a lot to-do, to-hear, and to-talk are certainly a must in cultural events, but (physical and mental) spaces left for spontaneity and for taking time are equally important.

After the shoes were taken off, or even before, the *Host/Hostess of the Day* welcomed the visitors, with a homemade cake, a bowl of soup, a tea or a smile. *Kindness generates kindness*,⁷ once a Brazilian poet wrote compulsively in all concrete pillars of an overpass in the city center of Rio de Janeiro, where I come from. With the speed of contemporary life, the overlapping of public and private urgent matters peeping up on your mobile device screen, the devastating flood of bad news in the media, we forget the basic feature of a culture of friendship and cheerful conviviality: kindness, a small gesture, a gift, a smile. In *The House of Open Gates*, everyday, a person who lives and/or works in the neighbourhood was nominated the “Host/Hostess of the Day.” Imprinting a character and a generous amount of heartfelt hospitality, the hosts and hostesses showed that a gift economy is possible and in fact, it has always been there.



Figure 5. Hostess of the day Marija distributes rose petal cake

The space design focused on creating an ambience to host a *multicultural and multigenerational* public, a space that is not often to be found in the city of Graz: welcoming, cosy, open. During the research phase on “gathering spaces,” it became evident that eating and sitting habits vary within different cultures and that a space for being together can also be generated by laying a carpet on the floor. This became a design strategy: to offer sitting possibilities in various heights, using rugs, mats, pillows, tableaus and chairs as support, and having serving trays and tables also in different heights, thus enabling different modes of appropriation. These were collected from handmade work in the neighbourhood, imported goods from specialized shops and outcomes of the preparatory workshops, such as the cushions embroidered by the *Samovar Café* participants and architecture students.



Figure 6. Impressions from the space: different activities and spatial displays for a multigenerational public.

The configuration of the internal and external spaces was flexible, to be adjusted to the different needs of visitors and to the different activities, with possibilities for guests plugging in their own music, dancing and singing, embroidering, printing or painting, simulating the presidential vote and discussing about urban citizenship, narrating stories of migration and listening to stories on more complex cultural identities. With spaces for drinking a coffee, a tea or a beer of unusual origins, but also for babies to take a nap and small children to construct railways and impossible towers, the House had also spaces to withdraw, using the library box to get inside and read a book. The special selection of books, made by Kama NGO, was based on suggestions from migrants and refugees who attend their courses. A multilingual library with important authors from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Nigeria etc. inserted another layer of decolonial small gestures, expanding the horizons of literature. The selection of children's books was similar and stories from other continents were being told without being exoticized.

All in all, full of expected and unexpected simultaneities, *The House of Open Gates* became an enclave in the city, a temporary space for transversal togetherness, a meeting point for vibrant solidarity and conviviality, while western society's structures and infrastructures keep excluding us from each other, directly or indirectly, voluntary or involuntary we are constantly divided according to talents and interests, economic, cultural and social backgrounds, and finally also according to age, race, beliefs and origins.

A Possible Future?

This set of questions and actions as discussed and performed in *The House of Open Gates* can be situated within a growing critical practice that works with artistic hospitality and radical imagination as methodologies for creating forms of knowledge exchange and creative togetherness that expands what community is or can be. These practices foster firstly a culture of solidarity through gift and sharing economies. Secondly it counters biopolitical discipline through reinventing body-time-space relationships, exposing political positions in a specific site but also in the world at large. Finally, it acknowledges the value of nurturing mutual trust while empowering the different, eventually complementary individual competences and contributions within the groups, as shown in the participatory design process. Through this, I would like to pose the question whether one can “become more by being there:” if *The House of Open Gates* was a space of encounter that was designed and facilitated to open up the imagination within a safe environment of hospitality, could its visitors – while being there – “become more”⁸ as Paulo Freire suggested?

To re-imagine our social spaces, we have to enable a wider sense of belonging that is transversal to commodified and stereotyped perceptions of the other. To make a collective of common people: the Volksgarten's daily dwellers, the privileged cultural publics that attend a renowned festival as the *Steirischer Herbst*, the various activist, cultural, political, educational associations that work throughout the neighbourhood, the ethic shops, the students, the “creative class,” the politicians and decision-makers, the friends and families of all those, migrants or locals, with

localized/cosmopolitan practices or not. I believe these spaces of inclusion can be emancipatory, they can bridge the *fear of the other into an openness to others*, and bring the hypothetical ideas of a solidary world and freedom, into practiced forms of solidarity and of freedom. Such spaces of multiple inclusion, and explicitly not of integration, are extremely needed in the times we are living in. Within a public exercise of radical imagination, *The House of Open Gates* demonstrated in practice how the rich, diverse, solidary and vibrant city we dream of, can in fact be.

Endnotes

- 1 An internationally renamed Austrian “avant-garde festival with tradition” held in the City of Graz, Province of Styria every year since 1968 that brings together for 2-3 weeks/year Arts, Theater, Performance, Architecture, Music, Theory and New Media. It networks various cultural producers of the city during the time of the festival to host curatorial projects under its yearly-chosen thematic guidelines.
- 2 This district name was created within an artistic research project ‘rotor’ initiated in 2009, which named a „non-delimited area“ around the Annenstraße shopping axis, the border between the districts of Gries and Lend, both historically hosting a high number of low-income, worker and migrant populations.
- 3 Lederer/Makovec. *The Art of Urban Intervention*. Vienna: Löcker Verlag, 2014. pp.24.
- 4 Institute of Contemporary Art, Graz University of Technology. The archive of the course can be found here: <http://izk.tugraz.at/semesters/summer-semester-2016/encounters/>.
- 5 The Social Democratic Party (since 1950s) in the part of the building we were subletting, and the Social Service for the Homeless of the Municipality, occupying the other half.
- 6 Latour, Bruno. *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005. pp.16
- 7 Prophet Gentileza (Kindness) was an urban personality, a sort of artist-preacher, that inscribed his criticism on the world and human civilization at large. He worked illegally with text in public space from the 80s until his death in 1996, partly became protected under the Cultural Heritage law in the city of Rio de Janeiro. In the last 10 years, his main quote „kindness generates kindness“ became wide-spread in the form of T-shirts, bags and even flip-flops, a positive meme of pop culture.
- 8 Freire, Paulo. *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, New York: Seabury Press, 1968.
Freire values the forms of being: being more/ being less (ser, ser-mais, ser-menos in Portuguese), which I personally prefer to translate into “becoming more/ less”; as I understand this as a constant process of actualization and re-signification of oneself, through empowerment or oppression.

References

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