

# Underground Passages, Parks, Squares with Historical Monuments, Boulevards - Places of Public Spaces Ready for Art?

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What are the basic conditions for art intervention in public space, and how do these interventions interfere in spatial structure and artistic contexts? The SPACES project collected many people's experiences with artistic actions and started a discussion about art production in public space. The present conditions for cultural production in the SPACES' cities offer limited resources for artists, but they are nevertheless vibrant parts of the contemporary art scene. Art communities are inadequately supported and face many challenges; in fact, both the region and international art production itself need appropriate support. The artists who participated in the SPACES project and their artistic production showed the gap between the artists and activists on the one hand and the officially approved arts expressions on the other. By exposing these concepts in public space, the different views and interests expressed in SPACES were occasions for innovative encounters between the participant artists and an audience made up of random passers-by.

SPACES organized art interventions in public spaces in four post-Soviet countries. The SPACES caravan chose the capitals of Georgia, Armenia, Ukraine, and Moldova for artistic, participatory events. In this way they supported the local culture and arts CSOs and NGOs in their own organizational and artistic work. The project invited submissions from international and regional artists for interactive projects that would take place in selected urban spaces, establishing civil society processes on marginalized public sites that could support and empower local residents. This text focuses on the spatial and communicative circumstances of these artistic interventions in urban public spaces, and on their regional, societal and political contexts. Within the SPACES project, our qualitative social research accompanied the artistic interventions, aiming to reflect the processes happening in public urban space during the SPACES caravan events. This study of social impact showed that SPACES art performances enabled and supported changes in the usual interaction with the audience. The authors applied a qualitative approach to social research, based on interviews accompanied

by participant observation, interpretation of visual and written material, and narrative analysis. The sociological interpretation and reflection are based on the grounded theory approach.<sup>1</sup> The following article summarises the theoretical outcome and presents some of the empirical evidence.

### **Places for Communication: Conditions for Implementing Arts in Public Space**

Realizing artistic intervention in the reality of public space requires several capabilities on the part of both the organizers and the artists. In addition to the artistic Gestalt, which is described well in other parts of this publication, the implementation of the SPACES project raises the question of whether public space as a stage needs security measures – or what strategies artists and activists have chosen in this regard. Activities in the public space, even if provocative, should not lead to unpleasant disturbances by anyone, neither by governmental authorities nor by a critical audience. The governmental and societal conditions for a safe environment are not present in all the SPACES' countries to the same degree. Generally speaking, such a safe place for communication has to be created through a societal process that is accompanied by governmental acceptance. When reflecting on these basic conditions, we concentrate on the urban spatial conditions which are needed to establish a safe urban arts event; in a second step, we describe the conditions for communication which the SPACES artists aimed to create.

### **A Safe Place: The Urban Spatial Conditions for Articulating the Artists Expression**

Artistic interventions in public space need a safe environment so that they can take place and create communication with the audience. It was actually possible for most of the planned SPACES' activities to take place, some of them even in unpleasant urban environments where artists took the risk that hostile individuals might intrude. Even very small artistic interventions are connected with the general urban situation, and show that it is possible to use public space for democratic demonstrations and protests.

The basic conditions for private interventions in public spaces include an interested audience and a feeling of safety. These conditions varied according to the current political situation in each of the cities. The artists capitalised on their long years of experience to find safe ways to perform their actions. Chisinau was the smallest of the four capital cities where SPACES worked. In our fieldwork there, we observed several well-organized activities in public spaces, by groups ranging from large private companies to school classes. Such individual and private activities in public spaces were especially present in specific parts of the cities, for example in the big parks in the city centre. Activities in urban public space, such as recreation activities for individuals or families who rested and played in the open spaces of the parks, could not to observed outside specially designated areas of the city. In fact, we were

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1 Barney Glaser & Anselm Strauss: *The Discovery of Grounded Theory. Strategies for Qualitative Research*. Chicago (1967).

told that authorities excluded the population from specific areas of the city. The authorities dedicate certain selected urban areas to be legal sites for urban space activities. The SPACES interventions took place in urban areas accepted by authorities, who allow public activities by private individuals if they have a community aspect. Several of these activities, such as Flat Space, were carried out over a long period of time, slowly gaining a presence in public space based on repeated art interventions.

### **How Can the Artist Create a Communicative Setting with the Audience?**

In the public space, the level of communication is different from what it is in traditional art settings. In the relationship between art and audience, the level of communication which the artists manage to create through their work can be quite different. The SPACES artists saw their artwork as a means to disseminate and articulate societal issues that were urgent and well known, but not yet discussed in the public media channels. Art interventions were a way to concretise topics that had often been discussed in meetings between activists, but were not perceived by the general urban public or governmental representatives. Art interventions offered a way to present hidden topics in a public forum – these points arose in our dialogues with artists and with the bystanders and onlookers. In public space events, the intention to communicate with the audience was important for the artists, and they spoke of communication as a necessary precondition for artistic intervention in public space. Artists who were experienced in art performances in public spaces discussed with us in interviews the various levels of communication that were possible, and added that they tried to integrate the peculiarity of each specific place into their communication with spectators. One artist we interviewed pointed out that there is no art without context, and that the uniqueness of the particular environment invites her to include it in her performance. When applying this contextualisation to the creative process, the artistic intervention reflects the space itself, and incorporates that reflection on the space. Within this circle of communication, art interventions developed into public voices of criticism in public space.

SPACES events show that artistic intervention created places for a public voices and made it possible to reflect these statements in discussions with the public. Several interviews with artists addressed the topic of how artists become activists and how artists can transform societal discussions into artistic actions. Several artistic projects collected the voices of citizens to articulate their views, and developed the communicative setting to voice people's interests and opinions. In this way, the art interventions contributed to discussion and debate on life in various cities, and supported the democratic use of public space. In a flash mob on Northern Avenue in Yerevan, Armenia, the *Monument to Martyred Trees* by Davit Stepanyan evoked ecologically damaging governmental and economic activities in Armenian forests. The place chosen for this flash mob also recalled civic movements to save vanishing parks and to protest the forcible removal of old houses and their inhabitants. The action took place in the inner city of Yerevan, where the new avenue invites its

visitors into a modern shopping mall and an urban avenue. In the action, an activist had collected tree trunks, and, together with artists, built a massive monument in the middle of an elegant shopping street. Soon after erecting this monument, these artists had to make the monument vanish before the authorities could respond. The audience recognised this activity as a contribution of the ongoing, hidden debate, and was surprised to be confronted with the history of this place.

### **Lessons Learnt from These Examples**

The experience of the SPACES project shows that interventions in the urban public space are possible even if several societal and governmental conditions hinder the artistic production and activism. Further, SPACES art events prove that interventions can, in principle, be implemented, and organizers in the post-Soviet partner countries demonstrate that cooperation with local art scenes and governmental administrations is also possible. We observed that these art interventions had a positive effect on public and semi-public spaces, establishing new sites of urban encounter and civil debate, although the necessary safe conditions were not present in all countries. Within the SPACES project, a large number of independent, non-institutionalized cultural actors (i.e. civil society actors) positioned themselves to defend common urban public space and encourage public interests against the steady encroachment of capitalistic structures.

### **The Audience in Public Space: Art Events Change The Spectator's Role and Reflect the Social and Spatial Context**

The Public Pianos Project in Yerevan, Armenia placed pianos in the meadow of a city park for public usage. This example shows how a particular art intervention respected existing societal rules and preconditions of public space. The Swan Lake park is a conventional park, and the town administration has clearly made great efforts to make it attractive for the citizens: many topiaries made of bushes, an artificial lake with water fountains, a statue of the famous Armenian composer Aram Khachaturian playing his piano, numerous elegant garden and terrace cafés and restaurants, children's playgrounds. The park is part of the elegant city centre, very close to the renowned opera house. All evidence indicates that visitors come mostly from the city centre itself, rather than from marginalized neighbourhoods. Next to bushes which had been trimmed into the shape of pianos, the SPACES artists Anna Barseghian and Harutyun Alpetyan mounted real pianos, which allowed musicians and ordinary visitors to make their own music. This art intervention was carefully placed into the given social setting, respecting the role of the visitors and audience. Although they were not provided with stools to sit on, these five real pianos, on which the park visitors were happy to play, stood in strong opposition to the piano made from bushes at the entrance of the park, a mere decorative element without invitation to play.

With their pianos, the artists respected the scenery of the park: within the public space, they supplemented the bland scenery with a new aspect of activism. Some

visitors, young and old, enjoyed the pianos by playing or at least trying to play, occasionally with vocal accompaniment. Placing the real piano in the public park, the artist's intervention produces new options for visitors and invites them to be an active part of the scenery. The intention of the artists was to invite visitors and to relate them to the object of the piano without any communication technology: The deeply provocative open invitation calls the passer-by to the pianos. "And if you even know how to play, you can share your skills with the public [...]" Whereas the piano tuner knows that there is no mechanism which would enable communication with the public.<sup>2</sup> In this context, one of the SPACES pianos was at the same time part of the scenery and a provocation: the artists had purposely put it out of tune, referring to societal issues that are similarly discordant. The piano reflected the cultural scenery: pianos are often to be seen – and heard – and used in kindergartens, in concert halls, and in cafés and restaurants, but the presence of these pianos transgressed the boundaries of those places. This art intervention also changed the role of the audience: the Swan Lake intervention managed to find its way towards a new audience that was not used to expressing themselves in public or encountering contemporary music theory and practice. The material aspect shows a headstrong attitude, by placing five pianos in the free area, without protection against the weather, the rain. The concept of the artistic intervention is more powerful than the material constraints of the instruments.

The Swan Lake example shows that the public spaces where the SPACES intervention took place have their own ownership structure: a carefully designed inner city park with facilities and decorative furniture respecting the taste of the daily guests. The functional pianos as tangible art objects changed the use of this park. Similarly, in Chisinau, Moldova, the Oberliht Association created a new landscape by connecting several open places through several caravan activities: one park between two bigger streets became linked to the street corner of a park used by chess players, thereby integrating existing usage patterns. The Flat Space project transformed the existing usage patterns, reinterpreting the setting of a parking lot in Chisinau: in Oberliht's year-long presence in that space, the artists actually introduced completely new usage traditions: instead of having a storage place for old derelict cars, this rare free space transmuted into a housing estate and a centre for urban cultural actions. The parking lot of the former Soviet House of Culture thereby became an inspiring space of possibilities for youth meetings, film projections, and even gardening: using a strip of earth on the asphalt, the artists managed to grow corn, which they harvested during the evening when the SPACES Caravan was present.

In general, SPACES art activities in public space showed that most urban places, even if they look deserted and desolate, can be used by local people and transformed from places that seem neglected or abandoned into personalized environments. Carefully inserted within the given social structure, the art event

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2 Descriptions of the arts interventions can be found in the official programme at [utopiana.am](http://utopiana.am).

could create a common communication system where social roles could change. It was the artists' effort to transform the existing social situation into a new communicative system in public spaces. SPACES showed that this effort was rewarded with excellent art events.

An action in Tbilisi was a highlight for artists and social researchers. In Tbilisi's underground passages we observed that public space can change its previous functions and roles of spectators and the audience in general. By communicating in ways different than traditional arts production, interventions in public space invite participation in the situation and co-create an art event. This definitely changes the role of the audience and spectator.

The underground passages in Tbilisi are still-functioning remnants of the former Soviet regime, and under-used public places in the city. The passages were constructed underneath major boulevards and squares to separate pedestrian traffic from vehicle traffic. These low ceiling and poorly lit passages were constructed with only enough amenities to provide for their basic function, yet wide enough so that informal commercial activities could take place. In one ordinary passage that contained a number of semi-informal shops under Rustaveli Avenue next to the Tbilisi Opera and Ballet Theatre, artist Natalia Nebieridze covered the pathway through the passage as well as both entrance stairs at either end with a Hollywood-style red carpet. Every time a pedestrian stepped down the stairs to cross the street, spotlights came on, a video camera recorded the passage, music played, and everyone clapped and cheered. The passers-by reacted with surprise, sometimes dancing along the carpet playing the part, sometimes meekly smiling, sometimes walking more quickly, sometimes slowing down and acknowledging the friendly crowd. Some passengers also stopped to use their Hollywood moment for a film clip on their mobile phones... famous for one second!

### **Formulating Lessons Learnt from These Examples**

The distinct temporal extent of art interventions had a massive impact on the function and roles of places: by changing physical elements, the arts events were modifying the social experiences of passers-by. Most art interventions, including Red Carpet in Tbilisi, changed the experienced realm of the space. Transformative and transformational art, as present in the SPACES events, were required to evoke an arts discourse amongst artists, curators, and passers-by, and were directly connected to debates on the treatment of public spaces in post-totalitarian political systems. Thereby, facets of established and non-provocative arts were integrated into the critical approach of the single projects, in order to change the role of the audience.

Cheers and applause, these ingredients of traditional street theatre with a rather unspecified and random audience, found their moment. In this sense not just the role of previous functions and functional sequences of public spaces changed, but SPACES also established places of encounter towards contemporary arts.

### **Selecting Public Spaces for Art Interventions in the SPACES Project**

SPACES invited submissions from international and regional artists for interactive projects in urban space that would take advantage of the unprivileged characteristics of the architectonic heritage. Artists and organizers tried to establish civil society processes by empowering marginalized places that could support them. The following part of the article highlights several urban public spaces where actions took place and summarizes the social activities seen in different urban spatial arrangements. This does not refer to the quantity or highlights at a specific place, but describes the social activities in the selected urban space. The social activities depend on the intended architectural functions, and their actual use. For understanding and reflection, as can be seen in our photographs and material obtained through participant observation, we observed several social activities which were performed by passers-by before the SPACES events or independently. Following these fieldwork observations, we distinguish among urban places the artists chose based on whether they were spaces intended to move people through the town, whether they were parks that provide places to relax, whether they were (former) factories devoted to industrial production, or whether they were urban spaces whose purpose is controversial and not yet determined.

### **Functional Spaces. Pedestrians Moving Through the Town: the Example of the Underground Passages in Tbilisi, Georgia**

The SPACES project partner in Georgia selected the underground passages of Tbilisi as the site of a participatory arts intervention. The curator Nini Palavandishvili claimed the public spaces as places of intervention; the artists selected them to develop their art projects. The SPACES curatorial team organized a process to select artists with high artistic standards, bringing the interventions of art into daily life in public spaces. These art interventions took place in daily urban spaces of pedestrian tunnels, of a functioning bridge and of a huge underground shopping mall that was no longer used. All of these were spaces devoted to pedestrian mobility and the transport of goods. The art interventions encouraged citizens to interact amongst themselves and with the artists. The social impact study showed that the audience of the interventions considered themselves part of a daily social intervention with Tbilisi underground passages, with other residents and visitors. The extent of interaction varied by individual, but all of them made active contributions to selected urban spaces – by changes in the atmosphere, light, noise, or in the material appearance of the public space. Tbilisi underground passages were built during the Soviet era underneath major boulevards and squares to separate pedestrian traffic from vehicle traffic. They still function this way. For pedestrians it is almost safer to cross the street underground, although the passages are poorly lit. This functional urban space became a place for arts interventions.

SPACES art interventions showed that it was possible to change this functional urban space, where pedestrians walk through the underground city, through very modest material changes and social activities, which are presented by the

artists. In *Red Carpet*, the tunnel transformed into a stage for stars, and with the new identification of the space, its daily appearance changed too. The functional urban space was transformed into a personally-experienced community place. Looking back, some of the underground passages in Tbilisi were renovated after the interventions through privatization.

### **Recreational Spaces. Parks and Malls for Well-Being and Places for Memories, Landmark Spaces: the Example of Yerevan, Armenia**

The SPACES project partner in Armenia was the arts organization Utopiana.am. Its artists selected public spaces like parks, avenues and memorial spaces for their participatory arts intervention. All these spaces, including Swan Lake and Victory Park with its statue of Mother Armenia, represent different historical periods during and after USSR – Soviet, post-communist and post-independence. Utopiana.am is aware of the long tradition of activism between arts and public spaces in the city, being themselves partially involved in such activities. They were aware of the conditions given by the local authorities. Artists presented the ongoing discussion about losing public spaces and the critique of this development, and contributed with art events and public lectures to this public debate. Yerevan is the biggest city of Armenia, has about 1.1 million inhabitants, and, since 1918, has been the capital of the country. The city has a long history, but the contemporary urban landscape goes back to the General Plan of Yerevan, when Armenia was part of the Soviet Union. In 1924, the first Soviet city plan for the future development of the city was elaborated by the architect Alexander Tamanyan, who considered parks and plazas important urban spaces for urban residents. Today, Yerevan is losing its remarkable urban design. Through capitalism and contemporary political and societal changes, a new urban structure is developing: former recreation and amusement places change to commercial sites, and new shopping centres and apartment buildings are replacing parks and urban spaces. In the newly-built North Avenue, an example of failing civil engagement was established: this large new urban development is one of several recreation spaces where a civil activity failed. The inhabitants were forced to move out, although there were riots against the new construction plans.

#### **Landmark Spaces**

SPACES art interventions and public lectures in Yerevan took place in areas of recreation and at memorials. The locations were chosen according to their official status in the city as landmarks, such as the monument of Mother Armenia and the Cinema Moscow. The pianos at Swan Lake Park were cultural interventions that would fit into the local programme, where contemporary art could give a new accent to a public audience.

This led to debate and reflection on places that carry a load of history, tradition and confirmed habit. With simple interventions like playing a piano, reading poems in public, and gathering for a public lecture, a new common experience was created. The urban spaces of recreation and memorial dedication were transformed into spaces to reflect on new ideas and revised memories.

### **Spaces in Transformation. Points of Conflicts and Neuralgic Urban Spaces: Chisinau, Moldova and in Yerevan, Armenia**

Large town areas that obviously need planning scenarios and public interventions as they concern the city as whole are often topics of discussions among local residents. Projects going beyond small neighbourhood interventions require large-scale discussions about the new urban planning.

In the SPACES project, two partners choose such urban situations. One, in Chisinau, Moldova, was that of the proposed Cantemir Boulevard. The other was the Kond district in Yerevan, Armenia, whose future has also been under discussion for many years.

The SPACES project partner in Moldova, Oberliht, selected everyday public spaces like small parks and a large degraded urban district, conflicted urban spaces in the context of city development. The team related its work to history and presented an area which was strongly connected with the actual city planning for the Cantemir Boulevard.

If the Cantemir Boulevard is built, an urban neighbourhood will be demolished. The construction of the Cantemir Boulevard, which would follow a plan dating from Soviet times, would interfere with the old Chisinau with its 19<sup>th</sup> century buildings and traditional housing patterns. The public space events of the SPACES project focused on this contested urban area, establishing a contrast between old and new, between restoration and historical interests, and dealt with upcoming conflicts and/or possibilities of privatizations and new housing areas. The art events of Michal Moravčík and Jana Kapelová contributed to the work in the context of the idea of collective memory – expressing the voice of the neighbourhood, the traditional Balkan part of the city. Within the artistic intervention, artists invited residents to replace their old chairs: each donated chair was replaced by a new one. Out of the old furniture, the artists assembled a new public monument. This artistic intervention resonated with the transformations which this district is going through, and with its new character.

Although Chisinau seemed constrained by questions of ownership and privatization, the SPACES art interventions contributed to a new activism and new opportunities of encounter and discussion. The boulevard plan represents a general problem in Chisinau: a similar case is the plan to demolish the old 19<sup>th</sup> century post office.

Even in the time that Moldova has been an independent state, Chisinau has not managed to build up a new city plan. To some degree, the government aims to follow the old Soviet plans, and to some degree it wants to come up with new postmodern urban planning. The transformation process within the city includes both restoring historical buildings and creating new construction. This, combined with the uncertainty on the part of the government, leads to numerous rips

in the urban fabric. There are also uncertainties about the responsibilities in the government, which makes the work for the artists and activists even more difficult: the question of how to protect the old Chisinau buildings from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which is the task of the Ministry of Culture, interferes with the local city government and its own plans for the future. Stakeholders who are willing to contribute to where and how the new Chisinau should be developed are not being integrated into this political process.

In Yerevan, Armenia, the artists' intervention in the quarter of Kond revealed a similar urban constellation. SPACES worked with a local architectural team in an area similar to the Cantemir area in Chisinau: in its official city plan, the government designated the area as neglected area, which has to be razed and rebuilt with new modern architecture. In Kond, the city's neighbourhood planners respected the area's old landmarks such as the Moldavian Orthodox Church and the historic Persian mosque, but planned to transform this degraded neighbourhood and move the residents elsewhere. The old houses are slated to be replaced by expensive luxury buildings. In contrast, SPACES activists proposed that the city consider the quarter as a neighbourhood with high social and architectural qualities, emphasizing the communication patterns between neighbours as well as the traditional housing and street patterns. They have started participatory processes, and propose to include the residents in further city planning.

### **Neuralgic Urban Spaces**

SPACES art interventions took place in the urban areas with conflicting future plans. By choosing these specific urban areas for art intervention, the activities at those places contributed to strengthening the public debate about future city planning. In a bottom-up urban planning mode, plans for restructuring urban neighbourhoods should be under public discussion; SPACES art interventions supported the public debate and expressed conflicting views on present and historic city planning. This experience also showed that the use of present public space in a city is strongly connected with the overall urban processes of the whole city.

### **Industrial Areas. Space for Former Industrial Production: *The Yunist Factory* in Kyiv, Ukraine**

The Kyiv SPACES project partner selected the industrial buildings of a factory for their art interventions and performances. This intervention recalls a strategy practiced in several European countries (like England and Germany) which consists in transforming the closed down industrial areas into artistic places like museums, exhibition halls, or cultural centres for performances.

*The Yunist Factory* has a long history of being demolished and rebuilt. In the 1970s it flourished as a textile producer; in the 1990s the factory was closed for good. Since then the place has been waiting for a new life. Within the inner city of Kyiv,

this place is a valuable and expensive piece of land. There were plans to tear the buildings down, which created lots of public protest, and discussion spread. The owner publicly announced in February 2014 that he was dedicating the place to become a cultural centre. What kind of culture and arts should go into this place has yet to be decided, and the owners have entered a dialogue to negotiate possible strategies.

The SPACES project chose this place for a series of artistic actions in 2013 and established it as a locus of artistic possibilities. Most of the events had a performance character and invited the audience to interact. In this case, the audience was not ordinary passers-by as in the other towns, but people who had especially chosen to come for the event.

In one of the interventions, the audience was anxious to join in with Oleksandr Burlaka and Ivan Melnychuk who put 38 blocks of reinforced concrete that they found in the deserted factory, added 24 additional modules, and let the public create their own *Yunist* site – arranging round tables, amphitheatres, benches and combinations of all possible spatial arrangements with these blocks.

The target of the performance *Garden of Symbiosis* by Alevtina Kakhidze was to invite viewers into an artistic journey to a newly established place. In her performance, the auditorium took part in a fictive discussion with a company that invites Kakhidze to develop a project that goes beyond normal economic standards and ideas, offering her a honorarium for the artistic concept of one million; the audience was invited to express a preference for euros, dollars, or roubles. In stark contrast to the present economic atmosphere of competition, the artist developed the image of a public garden where plants would be displayed in their symbiosis in mutually beneficial biological coexistence. In the societal background of her performance, she included an ironic criticism: a business partner who first wanted her to sell "just ideas" asked, at the end, for products. The performance ended with her distributing funny paper origami hats produced on demand for all the audience. Although her concept placed equality as the central topic for the symbioses idea, the sponsoring company insisted that every hat, at the end, express a rigid hierarchy. When she presented her phantom house, Alevtina opened a second imaginary future space in her fantasy performance: a building that would contain things that we want to forget or not to see.

Overcoming alienation: what do urban residents know about each other, about their neighbours, about people whom they see at metro stations? Do they know their names? Again, Alevtina returned to an example from nature: she put a name tag on every little plant at the entrance of the former *Yunist* factory, as in a botanical garden: you should know which plants, which animals, which living creatures you share your neighbourhood with.

### **Industrial areas for future usage**

In his performance, Pavel Braila installed a camera on a toy airplane that he let fly in circles over the derelict *Yunist* factory. All the images that the camera saw were sent to a large public screen where the audience experienced the shifting environment, which gave the viewers a strong sensation of physical alienation: they were standing on an apparently stable ground, but at the same time getting dizzy from this vertiginous moving through the air – a symbolic statement of the insecurity of people's position.

It is hoped that new alliances will spring up and that the city government and the art scene will enter into a dialogue about a possible future for this urban industrial area which could be used as a place for artistic interventions. Will the citizens be able to influence the governmental system of the city according to their own preferences?

### **Historical Places and the Collective Memory Leading to New Identities**

The SPACES art interventions in the urban public spaces of the four post-Soviet countries took place in public places with symbolic representations and meaningful histories. Some of these places represented specific collective memories of the country, connected with specific historical events. With SPACES activities and activism, artists produced new meanings and new collective memories. Connecting the public place with new experiences created new occasions for remembering these events and, in a more general sense, for memory building based on a new contemporary situation. Public spaces conserving the memory of societal processes in the early 20th century were subjected to activist intervention in the SPACES project. Several of the urban environments which the artists chose were transmitters of historic presences, from post-Soviet to nationalist movements. When selecting such a spot for an urban space public lecture or for a guided tour, through their action, the artists attracted new attention to these places.

### **Cinema Moscow, Yerevan**

The backgrounds of the historical uses of these public spaces, including specific historical situations and conflicts, were researched in the SPACES project. Some of the selected places, like the Open-air Hall of the Moscow Cinema in Yerevan, showed the particular power relations of former times. This was true everywhere where the church, the government, and the numerous socio-political players including diaspora Armenians play their international power games.

In present times, the Cinema Moscow is a significant example in this struggle. It was saved from demolition by a civil society movement including a petition signed by many members of the public. Choosing famous places of common collective memory, the passers-by reconsidered the past of their own society and developed new perspectives on the past of the social space they were living in.

### **Mother Armenia, Yerevan**

Another impressive example of changing the collective memory was visually present on the poster of the Armenian caravan event. The Mother Armenia monument is "full of signs of the Soviet ideology" and has "essentially lost its monumental discourse dimension."<sup>3</sup> The local curatorial team of Yerevan created a work group of local artists and selected public spaces in Yerevan that symbolized the changes that occurred in the socio-political situation in Yerevan of the last 50 years. One such place was the public space in front of the Mother Armenia statue. This location had formerly hosted a monumental statue of Stalin standing on the same huge base as the one on which the Mother Armenia statue now stands. The official poster of the Armenia caravan is an image of the empty base, which is what would have been seen during the short transition period when it had supported neither the monumental figures of Stalin nor Mother Armenia. As no one would have likely taken a photo of the "topless" monument base, the photo on the poster had to be reconstructed by airbrushing out the statue from an existing photograph and replacing it with an ephemeral cloud. The ambiguous image thus alludes to an in-between time when any course could have been taken, but which itself had been largely forgotten.

The public lecture right in front of the monument explained the history of the monument and discussed related contemporary issues. In this lecture, too, reflections on former historical theories were presented, relating them to the Marxist theory of the material conditions and the human relationships in a town. This public space lecture transformed the surroundings of the Mother Armenia statue into a place of collective memory, attributing to the place a new function of reflection, in addition to the established daily use by tourists and visitors. This open place is high above the city, in view of Mount Ararat (formerly within the borders of Armenia, but now in Turkey). It is without doubt one of the most attractive places in the city: a good place to begin the journey from indoctrination to discussion and reflection.

### **Spaces Reflecting the Past**

SPACES events showed that an ongoing process of production and arts interventions starts the process of building up a new collective memory. There are several realms of reflection. They may be related to the town and its physical space. One of the Armenian artists explained in an interview how in Soviet times, government property was considered something foreign, even within the city and things that belonged to it. In his experience, this feeling still exists. Residents in former times, he said, felt that they could destroy this property without doing harm to anyone.

From this statement it becomes clear what a huge task the SPACES partners assume when they start reclaiming rights to the city.

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3 A description of the official opening can be found in the official programme of [utopiana.am](http://utopiana.am)

All four cities seemed to be dealing with serious questions of ownership, identity and privatization. The SPACES art interventions contributed to a new activism and offered examples and new opportunities about how to use public places of the city in a participatory way.

This was the case with the Cantemir Boulevard area. SPACES carried out a residency programme which invited inhabitants to join the art intervention. The artists put up new attractive traffic signs and utilized the four symbols of playing cards – hearts, diamonds, spades and clubs – and used them as new, playful signs for how to appropriate public space. The audience did not appreciate their artistic value, and would have preferred other symbols like pigeons or trees, but they appreciated the fact that an action took place, the artists thereby giving importance to their living space. The fact that an artist was showing interest was the important message, even if the artist himself had started out with a more sophisticated message: according to his own interpretation, his signs carried a philosophical message, namely that some people have good cards and other have bad cards, according to the luck of the draw – or according to their position in the social hierarchy.

With this art intervention, SPACES contributed to the renewal of the area and started to reshape the collective memory of this place. The contemporary city government has excavated hierarchic planning schedules from Soviet times that aimed at establishing a huge boulevard based on their monumental aesthetics; the small symbolic arts interventions helped enhance the discussion about urban design and its political dimension in the past as well as in the future.

### **Conclusion: Activism in Public Space**

The tactic of the SPACES partners, connecting societal conflicts over public space with artistic interventions in the local place, was based on the fact that the events were conceived as occasions for encounter within the civil society partners, and the public spaces turned into places of communication, discussion and further on in places of civic protests.

The forms varied from town to town. In some cases, the passers-by could interfere in the physical realm – for instance by changing the colours of the electric bulbs of an underground passage: in the artist's intention, this gave the passers-by the possibility to make an active choice in an existing urban setting. In other situations, artists used the public space for meetings, protests and arts interventions.

The arts interventions in SPACES show that arts find a way, even under difficult societal conditions, to articulate visions and scenarios concerning the present and the future of public spaces. Statements from artists and passers-by illustrate how they welcomed these interventions, establishing public space as a place for

expressing the residents' opinions. They argued that even these small interventions express how the citizens can claim an active role in the city, thereby going in the direction of citizens' rights.

Through SPACES interventions in the urban public space, art events created a space of possibilities for new points of view and interpretations of urban situations. They gave an opportunity to connect the place with new social activities and to build up a new experience for the place and its residents. This new experience opens up the mind for new possibilities, simultaneously creating new histories and new uses for the place, new collective memories and new spaces for civic and democratic activities.

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