



**Urban Culture, Public Space and the Past:**

**Urban Peace and National Welfare**

# **REFUGEES AND THE CITY**

**Annual Reader 2015 - Booklet II**

**Interdisciplinary Centre for Urban Culture and Public Space**

**Faculty of Architecture and Planning, TU Wien**



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# THE ART OF COOPERATION. EDUCATION WORKING SPACE AS A COOPERATIVE INCUBATOR

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In spring of 2015, the dean invited our faculty (Architecture and Spatial Planning, Vienna University of Technology) to the "parliament of questions," where future research and teaching focuses of the faculty would be defined via cooperative discourse. With our contribution we (Karin Harather and Renate Stuefer) initiated the "education working space," a faculty-wide working group concerned with spatial issues in educational processes. Since we wanted to arrive at concrete actions as quickly as possible (research-led teaching), we first sought to cooperate with Prose - Project School for Everyone! This private, donation-funded educational initiative supports young refugees and migrants. It allows refugee youth as young as 15 years old, who had previously been excluded from the school system, to complete the compulsory graduation from school and to establish social contacts. Because the spatial requirements of Prose are constantly growing and its teaching is not bound by the rigid framework of the institutionalized education system, we understood that this represented ideal conditions under which to jointly define new meeting and educational spaces. In doing so it was important to us not only to jointly conceive of urban, informal, and consumption-free alternative models, but also (depending on the medium) to actually implement them together.

In May we began to prepare for a corresponding cooperative lecture format, with the objective of putting education-relevant processes in motion together with Prose and condensing them into concrete spatial scenarios of a humane arrival and stay. With the future.lab course "Artistic project Displaced - Participatory action research: urban educational spaces for young refugees" we left the usual place of learning at the university and entered into further collaborations: within the university with SKuOR - Interdisciplinary Center for Urban

Culture and Public Space and with design, build - Department of Housing and Design, and outside of the university in addition to Prose with blink, the Initiative for Building Culture Exchange for Young People and urbanize!, the International Festival for Urban Exploration.

## **The Cooperative Playground of the urbanize! Festival**

Together with the teaching team at SKuOR and Prose we developed the open project week "Displaced. Refugees and the City" and the discussion evening "Displaced. City, space, and escape" at the Table of Plenty for this year's urbanize! Festival.

In keeping with this year's festival motto, "Cooperative Playground - do it together," this intensive week from October 5-9, 2015 offered a productive testing ground for joint action: architecture and planning students, young refugees, teachers, and external participants brought their individual abilities to the table and, via participatory action research, developed new forms of informal learning - with each other and from each other.

The urbanize! Festival Center, where we worked throughout the week, mutated "into a cooperative playground: amid the ambience of a former finance building in the center of Vienna, urbanize! brings artists, urban activists, and urban researchers together to explore the possibilities and pitfalls of the collaborative processes. The Cooperative Playground opens up a playful field of learning and experimentation in the oeuvre City, located between social laboratory and self-made amusement park, in which the art of cooperation and its impact on the urban space can be tested - in workshops, joint work processes, whether one is watching, presenting, or using the DIY attractions. It provides a space for exchange and experimentation, in which ideas turn

into action, fiction becomes reality, and conversations become attempts. It is a laboratory and a bold collage of participants, festival guests, and visitors who through their participation co-produce the festival and thus work together on a prototype of the collaborative development of urban practices" (urbanize! program booklet 2015: 6; translated from original German).

Since the (spatial) framework had changed significantly shortly before the festival began, it was natural to keep our project orientation correspondingly open and flexible: the festival headquarters building – the former finance authority in the center of Vienna, which had long been vacant – was made available for short-term transitory housing for about 1,000 refugees by its future users, the University of Applied Arts, and its owner, the Federal Real Estate Agency. In keeping with the motto do it together, the Red Cross, which had assumed responsibility for the emergency quarters, and urbanize! agreed to share the building during the festival and to make it into a place in which the acute care of people seeking protection and the creative potential of urbanize! actors could develop synergies for future-oriented cooperation.

One of our first objectives during the urbanize! week was to gather everyone who was interested in the current challenges, particularly our colleagues in the faculty, at a Table of Plenty, and to prepare a thematically appropriate substantive, spatial, and culinary setting for this. Through six different "dinner parties" the aim was to explore existing and future practices and networking opportunities and to pursue a question with our guests: what can architects and spatial planners, university instructors, students, architecture professionals, artists, urban researchers, and urban activists do in light of the current challenges; what is our societal responsibility; what will our concrete contribution be?

The impulses triggered by the "dinner parties" have now been introduced in the recently added internal faculty platform "Escape – space – architecture," and we hope that this will initiate additional cooperative networks.

### **The cooperative dynamics of the project Displaced\_Space for Change**

Project groups were formed from the six different "dinner parties," and these will continue on through the urbanize! Festival as well as in various courses of the Master's Programs in Architecture and Spatial Planning and will be supervised by the teaching

teams with different focuses throughout the semester. Below I refer to the activities of the project group Displaced\_Space for Change, led by my colleague Renate Stuefer and myself, which continues to work in the building even after the completion of the urbanize! Festival. Characterized by uncanny energy and dynamism, the work in recent months has focused not only on the implementation of acute architectural-spatial measures, but also on building efficient team structures, internal and external communication networks, as well as material, time, and financial sponsorship. The core Displaced team consists of Yasmin El-Isa, Rupert Gruber, Jacinta Klein, Lilian Mandalios, Elaine Mang, Julia Menz, Stefanie Mras, Maria Myskiw, Karina Ruseva, and Simon Uebleis-Lang, who are also supported by many, sometimes changing internal and external actors.



Table of Plenty at Urbanize Festival 2015 (© Dérive, 2015)

At the beginning of our activities on the ground, the former finance authority building functioned as an emergency shelter and housed up to 1,500 refugees. Lately, the building serves mostly as buffer quarters offering about 850 people a longer-term roof over their head and additionally taking in about 200 transitory guests on a temporary basis. Since this historic building was never intended for residential use and has been completely vacant for years, precarious conditions prevail.

The spatial structure of the former administration building permits neither cozy privacy nor welcoming, communicative assembly. Moreover, excessively rigid fire regulations prohibit the use of textiles on the premises unless they are properly treated with flame retardant. The unappealing, minimal furniture with benches and loosely hung garbage bags reflects the dismal and monotonous daily situation in which the residents of the building have found themselves for months. Since there are no lockable storage facilities, many people

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hesitate even to leave their assigned sleeping locations.

In close cooperation with the Red Cross and together with the building residents and other helping hands, the Displaced team has managed to achieve a minimal level of residential quality through targeted interventions. First, play and leisure areas for children were created during the urbanize! week. The Meeting Café, which opened in mid-November and offers a multi-purpose community area, is a "no budget" project planned through the cooperative, tireless work of the team and implemented with the support of internal and external helpers. In order to be able to jointly and independently fabricate much of what was required for equipment in the cafe (and subsequently also for other areas of the building), a workshop has been established.

After months of effort and tough negotiations, the lacking sanitary infrastructure has now been provided in the form of makeshift shower containers in the parking lot next to the building. Through the technical expertise of the students – the sophisticated planning, the cogent refutation of all counter-arguments, the subtle arrangement and structural adaptation of the containers that the Displaced team achieved through their own efforts – an optimal quality of space has been created in spite of these stopgap measures.

In the meantime, the University of Applied Arts has also entered into this cooperative process: teams from the "Social Design" program, as well as students finished with their classes and graduates have taken over diverse programming and activation functions. Together with the building's residents, they look after the operation of the café as well as various events and workshops. Now, the University of Music and Performing Arts has offered to host seminars together with the people in the building. Even a TV studio will soon be set up there, where a daily program will be made with refugees and regular broadcasting operations will be established. The momentum is incredible, the networks expand by the day, and unimagined synergies suddenly make many things possible in this exceptional situation. And once again this shows that the high art of cooperation probably functions best away from bureaucratic structures, informally, on the basis of individual cooperation and the personal commitment of individual protagonists: away from monetary interests, with the simplest materials but plenty of warmth, a model-like place for intercultural exchange and encounter is created step-by-step; a place where one is willing to learn with and from one another; a place where the contemporary culture of welcoming is the actual practice.



Student building furniture for the refugee shelter (© Dérive, 2015)