Remote Places, Public Spaces

The Story of Creative Works with Ten Small Communities

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Human Cities

Introduction

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In the 21st century, cities face rapid urbanisation, economic and cultural globalisation, and environmental crises. During these last few decades, cities have forgotten citizens' crucial needs in their race for progress, development, and inter-city competition to attract investments. They have forgotten that they are made for people, not cars. Urbanisation gained ground and changed landscapes and how people live, work, and spend their leisure time. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has increased interest in rural areas in many European countries. The concept of working has changed a great deal, as new technologies can be accessed everywhere. It has suddenly become easier for people to be digital nomads while living in prime residential areas, which are less accessible but allow people to live affordably and reconnect with nature. The Human Cities/SMOTIES project was designed before the pandemic and started just after the first lockdown. SMOTIES highlighted the creativity of small and remote European places.

The Human Cities concept is universal, and for us it began taking shape in 2006 as a platform for interdisciplinary exchange to examine the liveability of public spaces by using participatory design to feed into processes and innovation. Four main projects have been undertaken over the years, involving different partners and topics, but with a common denominator: designing public spaces with people in mind. This has helped to consolidate the approach and created opportunities for several cities to implement innovative artistic and design projects, develop network-building capacity, and diffuse cultural values.

The platform started with its Celebrating Public Space project (2008-2010), funded by the European Union's Culture programme. The project examined how design theory and practice could conceptualise and generate viable solutions to establish unprecedented forms of community and public spaces in cities. The inaugural Human Cities Festival, Celebrating Public Space, held in May 2010 in Brussels, was an international symposium that featured an exhibition called Places to Be, which presented the outcomes of various activities carried out in cities as part of the project and issued an international call for ideas. This effort led to subsequent projects, underpinned by a robust theoretical framework to enhance people's active engagement.

The Reclaiming Public Space project (2010-2012) focused on grassroots initiatives of non-institutional actors such as citizens, artists, and associations. These initiatives aimed to shift the configuration and ownership of public spaces. These creative, human-centred endeavours, contributing to diverse forms of urban investment, sought to harmonise two facets of the public space concept: the political – as a forum for exchange and participation – and the tangible – as an inclusive space. The Human Cities Festival's Reclaiming Public Space took place in Brussels in March 2012, accompanied by a symposium known as the Civil Society Reclaims Public Space: Cross Perspectives Based on Research. This initiative aimed to promote active

engagement and participation among people through a human-centred and participatory design approach, exploring and experimenting with the desire to reclaim public spaces.

Challenging the City Scale (2014-2018) was an interdisciplinary project co-funded by the European Union's Creative Europe Programme. That initiative transformed contemporary cities, mainly focusing on how residents reinvent urban spaces through various experiments. The project engaged with diverse locales, such as vacant spaces, shops, public squares, parks, and streets in towns and cities. Since it aimed to work with inhabitants to improve their urban living environment, its research and activities relied on the contribution of other disciplines: architecture and urban planning, social sciences (sociology, economics), arts (theatre, street art, performance), education (formal and informal), and technology (modelling, makers' hubs). The lessons fed into the project's approach based on experiments, research, and practice. We concluded that public space was clearly no longer a field exclusive to specialists. Rather, in many European cities, it is subject to debate among citizens. In such debates, designers and architects often act as empathic mediators. Over four years, the project has seen countless activities and outputs: an investigation, co-creative sessions, experiments, international workshops and conferences, master classes, exhibitions, digital catalogues, videos, a website, publications, and a book, *Challenging the City Scale: Journeys in People-Centred Design*.

When applying for the Creative Europe funding in 2019, the partners decided to add a new challenge to the network to get out of what became a comfort zone, namely the urban context, and apply the expertise, approach and methodologies developed throughout the years to small and remote places. The project SMOTIES: Creative Works with Small and Remote Places (2020-2024) was carried out in ten small and remote European places that are depopulated, relationally remote depositories of material and immaterial culture at risk of not being sufficiently valued, consolidated, and handed down, and can therefore be lost. The goal is to allow these places to benefit from the cultural and creative works developed in public spaces by the ten project partners, known as nodes of creativity, through a shared methodology (based on design thinking and future studies). The four-year activities engage local communities to build its audience, facilitate out-of-country travel among creative professionals, develop master classes and educational training, and evaluate the project's impact to create a long-term legacy in the places involved.

The ten nodes of creativity (partners) include public institutions, design centres, creative agencies, national associations, and research centres located in ten European cities: Milan, London, Reykjavik, Tallinn, Ljubljana, Funchal, Saint-Étienne, Graz, Cieszyn, and Ermoupoli. They were chosen because of their particularity of position, cultural uniqueness, development potential,

and consolidated role in their creative sector. They are not "small and remote places" but leading players in their national context as interlocutors, activators, and supporters of creative works to be anchored in public spaces in a selected small and remote place in their country.

SMOTIES deals with issues linked to the complex situation of far-flung places in Europe: small and remote places and inner areas suffer from "relational remoteness" because there is little knowledge-exchange impact regarding socio-economic, creative, and political innovation. Remoteness is not necessarily defined by geographical location – since mobility, in principle, transcends space – but by poor connections. Some urban settlements have experienced a population decline in recent years in areas far from and close to acknowledged centres, i.e. city suburbs.

The outcomes of this project aim to create a legacy for the places where they are based, and to address future development in terms of participatory and relational place-based potentials, supporting more systemic and just social innovation. Over the past four years, therefore, SMOTIES developed a toolbox, including a method to frame the design of public spaces in small and remote places and a publication with 50 best practices from Europe. This publication sums up the outcomes of more than 60 meetings with locals, 30 training sessions and master classes, 30 prototyping studios to test the results in the field, and 60 travelling talks which, in addition to a website and social media, disseminated the project to others.

The book's three parts will explore the approaches, engagement, outputs and legacy of SMOTIES.

Part 1 gathers ten stories taken from a variety of narrative perspectives and at different points in SMOTIES project development: some were close to finishing, others recalibrating, still others were closer to the beginning. Taken together they are meant to illuminate the many aspects of collaborative design pursued by the partners in the SMOTIES initiative. These voices from the territories are presented from the point of view of a design and culture reporter and editor who, during a year-long journey through ten European countries, visited all the small and remote villages chosen by project partners. The stories draw on interviews with residents and members of associations active in these areas; these sketches are an effort to understand what makes these places so vivid and unique and reflect what brings them together.

Part 2 is devoted to the experience and cooperation among partners and local stakeholders. They shared, compared, analysed and developed various methods and tools. Through conversations with the players involved, this section examines how these areas have been approached, with their strengths and challenges, how the residents and associations were engaged in this creative process, how different tools and instruments were implemented, succeeding in bringing out new ideas for reinventing public space, imagining solutions for the inhabitants with the inhabitants of these areas far from the big cities.

Part 3 uses an academic approach to analyse the work completed over the four-year project. The researchers' final scientific reflections on the research topics include a study on power relations in participatory design practices, participatory purposes, the social impact of design in remote areas, a reflection on case studies around the world, methods for prototyping public space, and design-driven processes of ethnographic research in territories.

These threads (concepts) underlie SMOTIES to stimulate experts, researchers, creative people, policymakers in the future beyond SMOTIES.

Celebrating Public Space (2008-2010)
Partners involved in this initiative led by Institut supérieur d'Architecture de la Communauté française de Belgique La Cambre [BE], Pro Materia [BE], The Lighthouse [UK], Politecnico di Milano [IT], Urban Planning Institute volunteered geography as a driver of the Republic of Slovenia [SI], with the expertise of Culture Lab [BE] and in collaboration with Cité du design – ESADSE, Saint-Étienne [FR].

Reclaiming Public Space (2010-2012)
Partners involved in the project led by ULB-Faculté d'Architecture La Cambre-Horta [BE], Pro Materia [BE], Cité du design – ESADSE, Saint-Étienne [FR], Politecnico di Milano [IT], Urban Planning Institute of the Republic of Slovenia [SI], Strategic Design Scenarios [BE], Time Circus [BE], and Clear Village [UK].

Challenging the City Scale (2014-2018)
Partners involved in the project led by Cité du design – ESADSE, Saint-Étienne [FR], Politecnico di Milano [IT], Urban Planning Institute of the Republic of Slovenia [SI], Clear Village [UK], Zamek Cieszyn [PL], Association Design Week Belgrade [RS], Pro Materia [BE], Aalto University [FI], FH Joanneum, University of Applied Sciences [AT], Estonian Association of Designers [EE], Bilbao-Bizkaia Design & Creativity Council – BEAZ [ES], and with expertise of Culture Lab [BE].

SMOTIES: Creative Works with Small and Remote Places (2020-2024)
Partners involved in the project led by Politecnico di Milano [IT], Zamek Cieszyn [PL], FH Joanneum, University of Applied Sciences [AT], Urban Planning Institute of the Republic of Slovenia [SI], Clear Village [UK], Cité du design – ESADSE, Saint-Étienne [FR], Estonian Association of Designers [EE], University of the Aegean [GR], Universidade da Madeira [PT], Alternance slf [IS].

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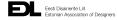
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EDL Eesti Disainerite Liit Estonian Association of Designers   idk Institut Design & Kommunikation   FH|JOANNEUM University of Applied Sciences   UNIVERSIDADE da MADEIRA

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