

# BEYOND THE URBAN/RURAL ANTAGONISM, PERIPHERIES ARE THE NEW CENTRE(S)

ALEX MESZMER & FARAH MAKKI

## ALEX MESZMER

Alex Meszmer (1968) is an artist and curator. Since 2020, he has been the director of Suisseculture, the umbrella organisation for cultural professionals in Switzerland. From 2007 to 2019 he was a board member of Visarte Switzerland, the professional association of visual arts. He was a board member of Culture Action Europe from 2012 to 2019 and was appointed vice president of this association from 2015 to 2019. Since 2006 together with his partner, Reto Müller, he has been working on a digital archive on the history and stories of Pfyng, Thurgau. They founded the Transitory Museum in Pfyng and declared Pfyng the cultural capital of Switzerland in 2011-12. Since 2014 they have been searching worldwide for the beauty of democracy with club désirer. They received grants from the Canton of Thurgau in 2008 and 2019 and an award from the International Lake of Constance Conference in 2011. They were awarded an artist residency by the Swiss Arts Council Pro Helvetia in Cairo in 2013, which led to Elmathaf Elrahal (the itinerant museum), a museum project in Asyut, Egypt.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.tandemforculture.org/>

<sup>2</sup> Matthias Kuhn, in Swiss Art 2/08, 'Art in Outlying Areas', p. 43, Visarte - Visual Arts Association Switzerland, pursued a programme on art in the rural context in 2008 and 2009, with two publications and two conferences. First, the province was examined: where it manifests itself and how it makes itself felt. In the second year, a map was created of exhibitions and events in the countryside, showing the diversity of projects outside the urban zones.

## ABSTRACT

The prejudices and clichés for rural areas and culture are manifold, since the belief that there can only be culture in the cities persists. However artists are increasingly looking for alternatives and new ways that can not only change the structures of the cultural scenes, but also the elitist ideas related to culture. The Tandem program<sup>1</sup> and its recent developments contribute to this while also daring to become active in cultural policy. Tandem Regions formed a group of organizations that worked together over a long period of time with the intention to add a perspective on cultural policy to the network. As a basis for the cooperation, the consortium worked with the cultural scientist/researcher Farah Makki to analyze which of the Sustainable Development Goals were already present in the cultural work of the individual partner organizations and to track the program and prototypes' impact journey. Each organization took the identified focal points as an opportunity to explore further development possibilities and to define which ones were desirable and which were to be pursued. From this process, four of the eight organizations developed a prototype project that built on the previous work and incorporated the development opportunities along with the additional goals. The remaining partners took on different roles during the process to bring in an outside perspective and experience as well as helping with the prototypes. The outcome was presented to a wider Tandem audience in February 2023 in Sofia, in order to invite more organisations to join and to discuss the possibilities of political influence within the European network.

## KEYWORDS

Tandem Program, rural-urban dialogue, prototypes, agency

*«Here I am in the boondocks bordering a somewhat skimpily protected spruce plantation, hidden behind a hedge of hazel bushes; before my eyes lies a fenced tract of land bearing a sort of transformer station hut. I deduce that the latter contains the compact silver boxes that serve as the junction points of a worldwide electronic network. The idea strikes me as rather abstract, since there is not a trace of a cable to be seen, nor are there any sounds to be heard other than the rustling of the trees in the wind and the chirping of the birds.»<sup>2</sup>*

The prejudices and clichés for rural areas and culture are manifold, because the belief that there can only be culture in the city persists. But artists are increasingly looking for alternatives and new ways that not only change the structures of the cultural scenes, but also the elitist ideas of culture. The Tandem program and its recent developments contribute to this and also dare to become active in cultural policy.

## FROM ARCADIA TO PERIPHERIES

The beauty of the landscape, the calm and slowness, and keeping more to the traditional and ritual aspects of life are what we still believe to find outside in the countryside and the non-urban periphery. Going back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century claim on behalf of the distinction between culture and nature, the authentic and primal are to be found in natural periphery that especially for the arts allow the artist to meditate and come back to the roots of inspiration. But we are no longer lacking technology in the outlying areas for in even the last Swiss mountain valley internet is

## CULTURE, CITIZENSHIP THOUGHTS

### FARAH MAKKI

Farah Makki (1986) is an experienced practitioner and researcher in urban and cultural studies, specializing in collaborative processes for sustainable living environments across the EURO-MED region. Since 2013 Farah has led action research programs for active citizenship, cultural and environmental sustainability, and actively contributed to community-led development. Her influence extends to translating local knowledge into regional strategic programming, facilitating partnership-building, grant-making, and impact evaluation for intercultural cooperation programs. In 2019 Farah began making significant contributions to MitOst e.V.'s program, which she represented in 2021 at the Voices of Culture, emphasizing the pivotal role of Culture within SDGs 2030. Collaborations with Cultural Relations Platform/EU DG NEAR, Ford Foundation and Culture Resource underscore her commitment to informing supportive action plans, programs and policies for culture and place-making.

available now and working remotely is available for most of the modern professions that won't need physical presence from anywhere in the world to anywhere in the world. The pandemic has further added to this development and helped to question traditional understandings of work, home, working hours and more.

The cliché of urban against provincial was already in question before the pandemic. 2018 Headlines told us that more than 50% of the world population are now living in urban environments and that more and more people are fleeing rural contexts depending on the country, the region or the opportunities offered.<sup>3</sup>

In Switzerland, in recent years, the question had been rather if the rural and natural is still in existence or if the country has turned into an all-urban space with some minor parts of nature in it. Public transportation and high-quality online connections allow one to work and/or travel from every place and back in a day. The traditional and rural exists more in images of Swissness and the minds of people. Villages have turned into faceless suburban areas between the urban centers. We live in the Swiss suburbia or rather in an 'agglomeration' and an endless assembly of same-same. By contrast Bulgaria is the European country with the highest outflow of people for economic reasons and suffers a severe brain drain in rural areas. Villages are being more and more abandoned, as the grandmothers and grandfathers are, that still stay on.

In many European countries, like e.g. Italy, old factory sites are abandoned after optimization and outsourcing of industrial production, and if not turned into modern lifestyle apartments, left empty with their inherited contaminations.

What was once idyllic arcadia is increasingly turning into abandoned wastelands or faceless clusters of bedsit places that are gradually being absorbed by the cities. Rural space is joined by the periphery, which is losing itself in its monotony. The periphery hardly gets any attention. The peripheries are forgotten places, forgotten by the media, politics, and the society. It is turning into a cultural diaspora whereas it is in fact just a region without attention. There are less people, less opportunities and less political representation.

### CONTRADICTIONS

The Swiss art historian Brita Polzer published in 2013 a collection of artistic projects in rural areas in Austria, Germany, and Switzerland.<sup>4</sup> She formulated her thesis that artistic and cultural innovations no longer come from the urban context, but from the villages and rural areas. She describes the advantages of the village: due to the lack of cultural experiences, the audience is willing to engage in new experiences. The paths to decision-makers and implementation are short, fast, and immediate in the countryside. Time passes in a different pattern. There is no 'time management', but still 'common' or 'community times'. Generally, community, living together and helping each other are big matters.



Schwingfest, traditional Swiss sport event in Pfyn – cultural capital of Switzerland 2012 (Photo: zeitgarten.ch)

<sup>3</sup> Hannah Ritchie and Max Roser, 2018. 'Urbanization'. Published online at OurWorldInData.org. Retrieved from <https://ourworldindata.org/urbanization> [Online Resource].

<sup>4</sup> Brita Polzer, 2013. Kunst und Dorf, Zürich.



Working together, cooperating, and working for a greater good is attractive to artists and cultural workers, coming from one of the most competitive fields in the urban space – the arts and cultural scenes. Although the fairy tale of competition making cultural products better and necessary for glorious artworks still holds true, cultural workers are increasingly interested in the alternatives. The aim is less to impress CEOs and the art market as to work with an audience that is happy to participate and contribute. So, we see a couple of contradictions coming up that represent different world views and settings. Competition is no longer attractive for artists and cultural workers, but the common good is. Engagement with an audience gives a direct response to cultural work and as well more value than the appreciation of an art market that has gone wild. And even if it has become fashionable to have participatory events at Biennales and Documenta, too, elitism is increasingly being replaced by a more democratic understanding and a more democratic understanding of art. Direct contact with one's audience can also have an impact on one's livelihood. Favorable living and working space, opportunities for cooperation, short distances to decision-makers can have its effect on surviving as an artist in a rural or peripheral context and is often easier than in city centers.

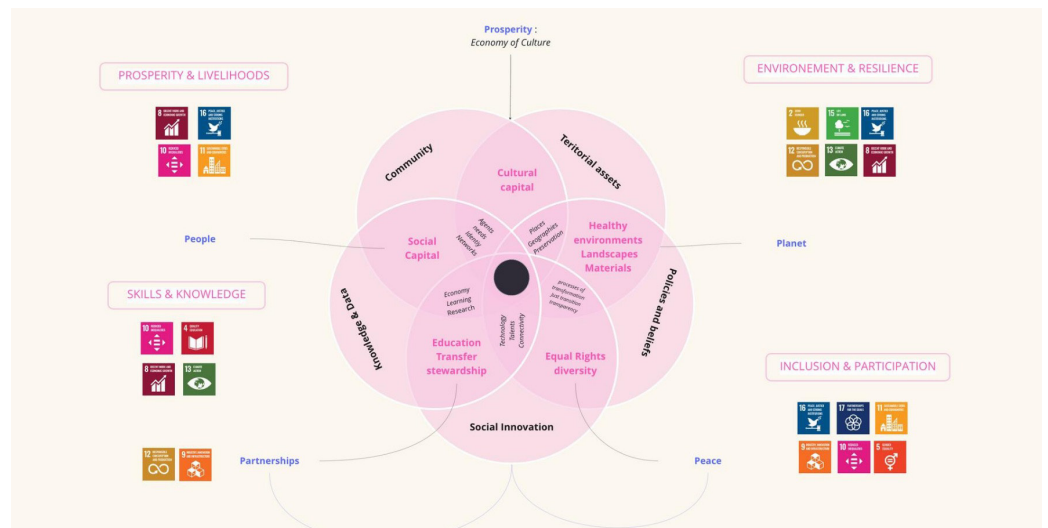
There is still one major obstacle though: attention. Culture is not confined to a small place, it needs exchange, the view over the fence, the mirror, the discourse.

The representation and information about culture in peripheries is reduced. The visibility of the diversity of culture in the rural context is needed and social media can only offer some replacement. So, let's start to look at some concrete examples that take into account newer developments and maybe show a way of what can be possible.

### TANDEM EUROPE AND OTHER TANDEMS<sup>5</sup>

The Tandem program was initiated 2011 by the European Cultural Foundation and MitOst e.V. The aim of the program was to strengthen civil society in Europe and its neighboring countries. It has been an opportunity for more than 400 artists, cultural workers and cultural managers from all over Europe, Ukraine, Turkey, the Middle East, and North Africa to meet, exchange experiences, learn from peers and network in the context of participatory work with communities, quite often in rural contexts or peripheries. The European Cultural Foundation, Fondazione Cariplo, Bosch Stiftung, Stavros Niarchos Foundation, and others have been supporting the program over the years.

Each Tandem Program lasted one year. They started with a meeting where the representatives of the organizations got to know each other through various forms - from Speed Dating, World Cafés to Case Clinics - and learn more about each other's work. The aim for the participants was to build a tandem of two organizations from two different countries and to develop a project together that was implemented during the program.



<sup>5</sup> <https://www.tandemforculture.org>

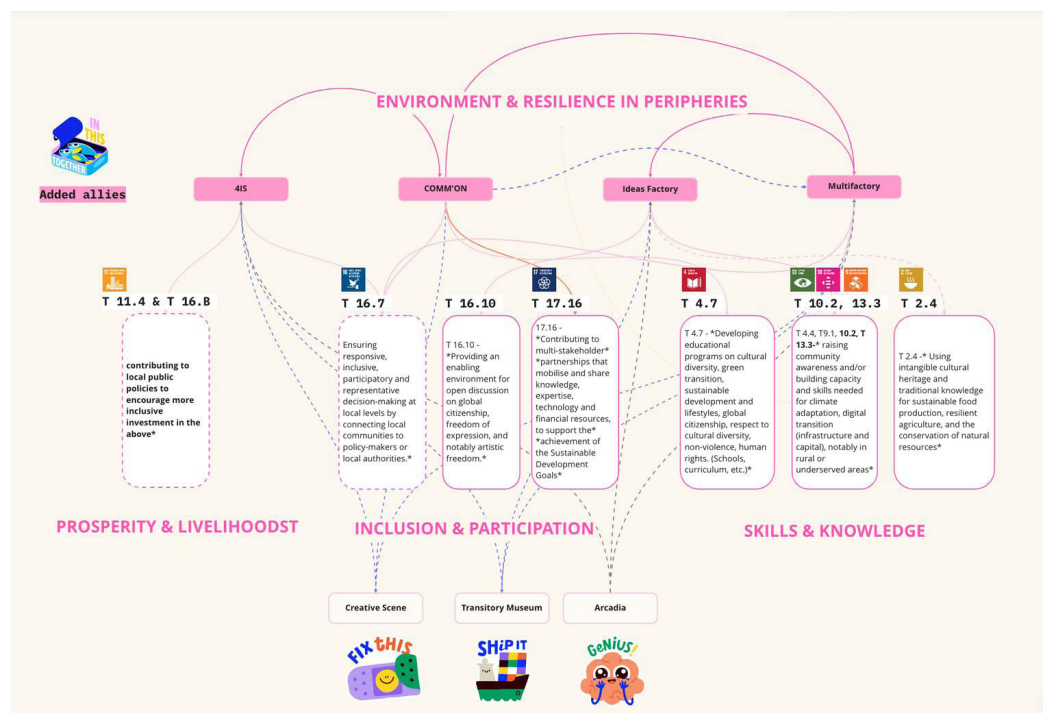




## TANDEM REGIONS

The pandemic made it impossible to conclude the Tandem Europe program in 2019. At the same time, it provided the space to reflect on the further development of the program and the network. The intention was to form a group of organizations that would work together over a longer period of time that can add a perspective on cultural policy to the network. Nine organizations from Greece (COMM'ON<sup>6</sup>), Bulgaria (Ideas Factory<sup>7</sup>), Ukraine (Insha Osvita), Germany (MitOst e.V.), Italy (R84 Multifactory), Portugal (4is<sup>8</sup>), the Netherlands (Arcadia<sup>9</sup>), the UK (Brigantia – Creative Scene) and Switzerland (TM@P<sup>10</sup>), working in peripheral regions, formed a new consortium in 2021. Starting in the middle of the pandemic, the first task was to establish common ground. Where do we start from? How do we work? What can we do together? What do we want to achieve together? Except for one meeting, the exchange took place regularly online. As a basis for the cooperation, the consortium worked with the cultural scientist Farah Makki<sup>11</sup> to analyze which of the Sustainable Development Goals were already present in the cultural work of the individual partner organizations. Each organization took the identified focal points as an opportunity to explore further development possibilities and to define which are desirable and which are to be pursued.

From this process, four of the eight organizations developed a prototype project that builds on the previous work and incorporates the development opportunities with the additional goals. The plan was for the remaining partners to take on different roles during the process – Learner, Adviser, Critical Friend, Butterfly – bring in an outside perspective and experience and help with the prototypes. The following four prototypes emerged.



Partnership's SDGs connections during the sense making sessions in September 2022 - Farah Makki

### Prototype 01 // 4is, Aveiro/Portugal Mapping Cultural Communities Off the Radar

Cultural practices and organizations working under the radar in peripheral zones are often overlooked due to different reasons we addressed above. This is where the "Mapping communities with cultural practices off the radar" prototype comes in, designed, and implemented by 4is in Portugal's Aveiro region.

This process aims to identify hidden cultural gems and create a networking format that involves community-based organizations and cultural agents operating in the periph-

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/commoncity/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://ideasfactorybg.org/en/news/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/4is.inovsocial>

<sup>9</sup> <https://arcadia.frl/en/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.museumpfyn.ch>

<sup>11</sup> Farah Makki has summarised the work of Tandem Regions and written an article presenting the outcome of the prototypes for the Tandem Regions Network Meeting in Sofia in February 2023. The descriptions of the four prototypes are shortened versions from her summary. The original article can be found here: <https://www.tandemforculture.org/stories/tandem-regions-for-the-sustainability-of-european-peripheries/>



ral regions of Aveiro, Central Portugal. The regions are often outside the radar of local authorities or have limited access to resources, with low participation in intervention programs and public policies. The prototype engages with cultural groups through a mapping process to understand their strengths, needs, and challenges. Currently, the prototype has engaged with over 25 off-the-radar organizations from 11 municipalities. The primary goal is to establish equal communication channels between the organizations, local authorities, and international entities to enhance regional networking and ensure sustainable operational capacity and autonomy.<sup>12</sup>

### **Prototype 02 // ideas factory, Sofia/Bulgaria Baba Residence goes Climartistique**

The Baba residency program, run by 'ideas factory', Bulgaria, immerses artists in depopulated villages to engage with local communities and re-evaluate cultural and natural treasures. In the new version of the program ideas factory focuses on the impact of climate change on rural life, specifically on water and bread. These resources are both direct and metaphorical means of survival in times of uncertainty and question how resilient communities are.

During the residency, artists live with local householders and collaborate with communities to explore pressing local issues such as droughts and grain scarcity. Through artistic interactions and expressions, urban and rural cultures can come together to raise awareness about the health of the living ecosystem. The role of "rituals" is explored as means of sharing experiences and traditions, sparking conversation, gathering knowledge, and inspiring co-creation of actions towards a more resilient and ecologically conscious future.

### **Prototype 03 // R84 Multifactory, Mantua/Italy The Villette Job**

R84 Multifactory has been securing its future, negotiating a long-term rental agreement with a multinational oil company for buildings that are offered to a variety of artists and cultural creatives as working spaces. The horizontal governance model of R84 Multifactory ensures that every member and user has a say in decision-making and plays a role in daily maintenance habits and future development. The organization is community-driven and lowers the barriers to entry for creatives, entrepreneurs, and anyone seeking a stimulating environment to work in. It focuses on circular support, trust, collaboration, and idea-sharing and reflects on suburbs and regenerating post-industrial sites.

Their Villette Job prototype included a year-long communication campaign that not only showcases the complexities and ambitions of the non-profit organization, but also transformed the community's perception of the area from a polluted wasteland to a thriving creative hub for independent regeneration, creative economy projects and resource sufficient. The prototype process focused on the role of working forces and organizational models in paving the way towards a clean energy transition.

### **Prototype 04 // COMM'ON, Athens/Greece The Creative Education (R)evolution**

According to the European Commission, "although active citizenship is taught today in all European Union countries, relevant education of teachers around this subject is lacking."<sup>13</sup> Likewise, Eurydice's 2017 annual report revealed that while citizen education is a main course in all primary and secondary education levels in Greece, teachers lack the necessary tools and methodologies to cultivate creative participation in their students and encourage them to become active in shaping the urban commons.

To address this issue, COMM'ON conducted a survey to identify the difficulties faced by teachers in their role as mediators between students and their local community and tested methods to drive their engagement. The goal is to create educational materials and design teaching interventions that support teachers and students in their communication with local authorities. Over 70 students participated in this effort, capturing the issue with drawings and writing letters to the mayor to stream their concerns and offer creative proposals. Youth voices yielded many practical solutions, including the creation of a homeless shelter, the removal of photovoltaic panels from land designated for food cultivation, the placement

<sup>12</sup> <https://offtheradar4is.wordpress.com>

<sup>13</sup> European Commission, press release, 4-6-2012



of panels on rooftops instead, the creation of cycle paths, the increase in waste bins, and the resolution of the stray dog issue to improve safety.

COMMON embarks in a pilot program to create a new generation of creative and active citizens who will hopefully shape the future of cities and communities.

## HOW CAN POLITICAL INFLUENCE BE GAINED?

The Tandem Regions community describes itself as a group of "practivists" who are interested in exploring how Arts and Culture can help transform the future of European peripheries. Farah Makki<sup>14</sup> points out, that Tandem Regions "is connecting place-makers and change-makers across Europe to localize Sustainable Development Goals and sustain existing efforts while growing the ability to act within a regional ecosystem of arts and culture. It is about weaving together the diverse tapestry of partners' passions, expertise, learning needs and in-house resources. The prototype-led approach leads to cross-cultural collaboration and social innovation and is forming cross-border constellations with other partners' realities. From the beginning the goal has been to learn how to influence policy and making transition possible through small tangible steps."



Tandem Regions meeting in Sofia 2023 (Photo. C. Flamme)

The reality of small cultural organizations in the periphery is very often that while they are important to their environment and network, it is difficult to gain influence on policy decisions beyond that. The desire of the Tandem Regions group to learn more about the procedures of political processes and the possibilities of political influence at the different levels led to a longer learning process, which made one thing clear above all: it is complicated and even more so in the European context. First, we are facing differences in the organization of cultural promotion at the various levels from local and regional, to national and European. Culture promotion in Switzerland is 95% in the care of the cantons, cities and municipalities; the cantons are responsible for culture in federalist Switzerland and a national culture promotion law as the basis for national cultural funding was first implemented in 2012. In Portugal, a large part of cultural promotion is in the hands of the municipalities. There is no cantonal level, but only a national level, which in many cases is a big hurdle. The guidelines and decision-making possibilities of the cantonal cultural promoters in Switzerland and the cultural promoters of the municipalities in Portugal are extensive and differ in many ways, so that an overview hardly seems possible. In Italy, on the other hand, cultural promotion hardly exists, in Germany as in Switzerland it is a matter for the Länder (with exceptions), while in the UK the Arts Councils are responsible in the regions. So how to reconcile all this? The situation at the European level is similar and our learning process is still ongoing.

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.mediation-culture.com/about/>



## WHAT WILL FOLLOW UP?

In February 2023 Tandem Regions invited over 50 members of the wider Tandem family to a Tandem Regions Network Meeting in Sofia. The core group of the Regions program shared their insights and learnings from the past two years of working together. They also invited Tandem alumni and friends to collaborate on developing the next steps. This included a discussion about the possibilities of political influence within the European network that was enlightened by Else Christensen-Redzepovic, project manager of *Voices for Culture* and her experience. She cast light on the agricultural Leader program that formed a similar network to what Tandem Regions has in mind. Leader is a local development method which has been used for 30 years to engage local actors in the design and delivery of strategies, decision-making and resource allocation for the development of their rural areas. It is implemented by around 2 800 Local Action Groups (LAGs), covering 61% of the rural population in the EU and bringing together public, private and civil-society stakeholders in a particular area.<sup>15</sup>

The vision of Tandem Regions is similar to what already exists with the Leader program. It is about empowering local communities and mobilizing spaces for action that can be further multiplied through intercultural cooperation at different levels. By activating local energies, cultural initiatives empower those who have been overlooked and want to bring about meaningful change. The power of culture and community needs to be unlocked by practitioners that foster transformative experiences and address urgent needs, from daily well-being to social and environmental justice in Europe's marginalized areas. Tandem Regions wants to act for a just transition and help to cultivate the soil for the next generation of change agents. We're creating more opportunities for learning and advocacy and hence hopefully for a sustainable future beyond the urban/rural opposition.

<sup>15</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/enrd/leader-clld\\_en.html](https://ec.europa.eu/enrd/leader-clld_en.html)