

CO-CREATING ARCHITECTURE

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A TRANSDISCIPLINARY COLLECTIVE

Växtväcket is a small transdisciplinary collective, organised as a non-profit association, based in the city of Malmö, in the most southern part of Sweden. We have existed since 2014 and are a group of landscape architects, gardeners, educators, social scientists and designers working with envisioning, creating and activating new meeting and learning spaces. Our work has its focus on the inclusion and empowerment of the young citizens of Malmö, an excluded and underrepresented group in public space. In the following pages we are to present some of the aspects of how we work. Some of the following elements of our methodology are sometimes still more ambition than reality. Our practice is in constant development and goes through a cyclical process of prototyping, testing, reflection and adaptation. And while on paper all these elements take equal part in our projects, the reality is more often that not all elements are present, or that they have very unequal parts in the different projects.



PEDAGOGICAL UNDERLININGS

Our methodology is built on our understanding of learning processes. We think that do-it-together is the central aspect of our projects and that this idea of collective action should saturate as many aspects of our work as possible.

Based on this we use some specific educational ideas to design our workshops. Firstly the concept of experiential learning and Kolb's learning cycle. It describes a learning process as a cyclical concept, that begins with a concrete experience, such as introduction to designing, constructing or gardening, at the start and that the learner through a process of reflection, conceptualization and experimentation continues to build onto his learned knowledge. In a co-design process this could look like a first playful part where the participants are allowed to interact with the material/method, without any requirements for a specific result. This is then followed by a reflection and an introduction through a more experienced builder/user. And finally with this new input they start to experiment with the material in a more directed fashion, such as to model or build a structure.

The other ideas stem from educational scientist Lev Vygotsky. His sociocultural theory says that humans learn in collaborative fashion and in social contexts, through groups, members, friends, and other participants that are more experienced than them. The learners support each other and help each other to advance their understanding and skills. The additional concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) points to the point between things the learners can do without help, and what they can't yet do. The

inbetween space, the things the students can do with guidance through peers or a guide/teacher/facilitator, is exactly the point we try to bring forth in our events and learning environments. The participants learn by helping each other and guiding each other forward. They are always exploring on levels they are slightly beyond their comfort zone, which allows them to move further. This type of education is closely related to the Swedish concept of 'folkbildning', which translates to the people's popular education. A liberal educational philosophy originated from the workers movement in the 19th century, where people learn together in groups, without a strong hierarchy of teacher/student, but rather with and through each other's support.

PROTOTYPES - TESTING AND TESTING EARLY

By using large scale prototypes and models the participants we work with, especially children and youth, get a chance to test, improve and showcase their ideas and visions in situ. Prototypes are simpler, less detailed, built in shorter time spans and often need less permits that are otherwise needed for permanent physical changes. Thus development or construction processes that normally take a long time, can be avoided and making architectural and design solutions more comprehensive and meaningful for children as the time spans from design till conception is broken down. Working with this type of modeling, can have an empowering effect as the young participants do see a physical change in their environment as a result of their participation.

Using prototypes in design processes with adults has also proved successful as it can be described as a way of sketching, but sketching in scale 1:1. By doing this you can get a sense of the site, the volume, spaciality and function as well as start discussions and new decisions in the design.

Prototyping and testing is really as forgiving and permissive as it sounds. By testing something you are open to iterative design changes and inputs. This is why we also try

to prototype not only spatial change but also concepts, methods, organisational structures and events.

Collaborations and co-creation

While we as an organisation in most cases are instigators, facilitators and leaders of a project we believe strongly in different forms of collaborations. This can be due to a higher innovation potential, but also for us to keep the work interesting and also continue our own personal and organisational learning journey. And as we firmly believe in the power of collective action, doing work with others is much more fun than just doing it always in the same constellation.

The main collaboration in all projects is with the actual end user and the different target groups on site. In this process we work together in all phases. Analyzing the space, designing and finally building it together. With this said, we still have a lot to explore in the final phase; maintenance and are currently searching for ways and methods in how new places also can be co-maintained to create long term sustainability and lessen the dependency to be dependent on continued external financial support.

THE FUNDAMENTAL OF PLAY

Play is a fundamental human right. And as such it lies at the core of everything we do. Play in its purest form is autonomous, unproductive and self-fulfilling, without any specific goal or productive value. It often upstarts spontaneously and can not be controlled or facilitated. It should be seen as absolutely essential to any human's life and development and should therefore be treated with utmost care and whenever possible aided and supported. With that said this "highest" form of pure play is often the most difficult form to implement in short projects, but rather a goal to move towards and a possible future function of a project. Within projects play becomes more of a method, facilitated play can help a new group to get to know each other and become more stable, to familiarize or analyze spaces or to discover new design ideas or applications for materials. Facili-

tated play can be in the form of games or experimentation or construction play. Often all it needs to become playful is enough time planned in and a good amount of objects to manipulate and an open attitude. If people (often adults) are not comfortable with such an open concept, as they might not often be asked to “do whatever they want”, a certain input, theme or direction can help to stimulate this experimental process. With adults the language also can be adapted as adult play is often stigmatized and adult participants can feel uncomfortable to play. A playground can be named a lab, play can become experimentation etc.

LIFELONG ARCHITECTURAL LEARNING

Växtvärk is Swedish for growing pain. The significance of this goes down to the origins of our work which started on the adventure playground. The adventure playground started as a concept in post WWII in Denmark, where kids played in the ruins of the cities. Adventure playgrounds are childrens original urban laboratories. Here the very young children are invited to dream and vision anything they want. The space provides materials and tools but the children are the authors and the builders of the playground without any focus on results. They themselves are the designers of their own processes. At first it might seem foreign and difficult to them, but when they explore the space and see what they are able to create, their abilities expand and their self-esteem grows. Sometimes this can result in tears, frustration or set-back. Like growing pain.

Starting off with this we are trying to think about adventure playgrounds as the first step of a journey of a child’s architectural/spatial learning. After early childhood follows architectural engagement through collaborative processes in a child’s immediate environment like school playgrounds, leisure parks and public places, neighborhood gardens. In adolescence: the democratization of urban space through tactical urbanism in different urban spaces and collaborative landscape/architecture processes where youth is present, spaces by youth for youth. These

processes continue up to an adult age, when people often have a much bigger possibility to really engage and influence their own environment and living spaces.

This is the vision we have and the goal we work towards. A continuous engagement of young people with their built environment.

FOOD, ART AND LEISURE AS HEART AND MOTOR

When organising activities and projects where one’s aim is to include a lot of different actors and stakeholders, it is important to strive towards creating a temporal sense of community, to not only focus on the spatial change, but also social changes that can stimulate transformative learning and be the seed for further community engagement. To reach this, it is essential to overcome or at least tone down differences and obstacles e.g by using accessible language and by creating opportunities where the participants can influence, be heard and share their knowledge and also gain knowledge. The force in combining the workshops with other activities that bring people together, such as food, music and games, should not be underrated.

These are the common grounds that we use to increase the chance to include people that were not initially interested or had the courage to participate. Collective eating and preparing food have been some of the most important and rewarding moments in our projects. Once the food is shared and eaten, hierarchies and cultural differences take a step back and the shared experience becomes central. These moments of shared food have sometimes led to better projects, deeper cultural understanding and more honest dialogues between different stakeholders than other dialogue methods we have employed. Food and free cultural activities are also a way to validate the time, knowledge and energy that volunteers and participants invest in the projects. Especially when the budgets are tight and there is no other way of compensation.

FLAT HIERARCHIES

In order to succeed with participatory design processes and projects that go from conception to implementation in short time frames, we believe that flat hierarchies and shared responsibilities are much more suited than top down organisations with very specialized members. In Växtvärket we try to cultivate a culture of mutual trust and cooperation. We take important decisions democratically and sometimes by consensus. While some of us do have specialities they are more built upon existing interests and sometimes specific talents rather than stiff specialization.

More often than not though we work with a method of responsibility and work sharing that changes from project to project. We call it 'ansvar/pepp' which translates to responsibility/peptalk. One team member becomes the responsible person for a certain task or area, while a second person becomes their motivator and person to talk to. It eases the burden of being single handedly responsible for things as it allows a dialogue with other team members and more interaction, instead of work in silos. The idea of shifting responsibilities is also for ourselves as we learn new skills and gain new knowledge for other projects. It is also a sensible thing to do when working with a very fluid organisational structure. Instead of specific tasks, knowledge and contacts being all located with one team member they are spread more evenly, which in turn makes the organisation less susceptible to organisational changes or members moving on to other work. This is an important consideration to make in such a field with short and intense periods of work and sometimes precarious conditions.

OUR GOAL: THE JOYOUS CITY

To end this text we want to address something that might seem simple but that we believe has a big impact - celebrations, events and festivals in the spaces and places we create. Celebrations have important social functions and can work as cultural rituals

to mark certain milestones in our work. For example a street festival or the inauguration party at the end of a project. The event can work as a clear final goal to strive towards, which can motivate and help young participants to look forward to, when some days might be full of hard work. This event can also work as a megaphone to communicate ideas and visions to other people such as politicians, real estate owners or other actors. An event can function as a meeting place where conversations about personal opinions and values can germinate and lead to increased mutual understanding. The ideas can through this also be disseminated and create more ripples on the water as well as being a good cultural thermometer to read and listen to people's opinion about the project.

Working with events and activities long term in spaces is also something which will have an impact on how a space or place is used, and by whom. By arranging public concerts, parties, barbecues, workshops or other activities more people will visit the space and develop a personal relation to it, also enhancing the chance of them visiting again and taking care of the space. Place attachment can increase wellbeing and aid to create sustainable communities. The winters in Sweden are long and dark, and people really need open communities and activities where they are welcome and can meet other people, without economic requirements. A concert, a fire or just a free cup of coffee can create those places and start these communities.

Graphics references

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