

Peripheral agendas

In this text, a real participant, me, is voicing her experience within a two week activity of 'Repensar la Periferia/Rethinking the Periphery' in Etxabakoitz/Pamplona from 23rd October to 3rd November 2018. With a real participant I mean this rare occasion of being invited into a setting that offered an **intellectual participation** (a mental and intellectual understanding/re-tracement of an architectural, interventionist, public work) as well as **social participation** (raising my awareness, understanding of certain social processes, involvement in decision-making) **and finally of an embodied participation** which meant an active concrete physical engagement. In the lead up to this visit, the 'Rethinking the Periphery' initiators, namely the three architects (Itxaso Iturrioz Zuluaga, Salomé Wackernagel, Xabi Urroz Zabalza) and I defined my role and also methodology.

Advised by Georg Zolchow¹, the initiators decided to involve an international, therefore external artist to contribute to the process of getting to know a site as well as having an external 'eye' for this specific contextual work. As such, I was asked to be on one hand an observer and on the other hand a conversation maker. I not only observed the neighbourhood, but also the creation process of this project and I observed myself. The only defined outcome after this process was a reflective report on my experience.

Three levels of observation

While the initiators planned to design and build an inflatable space in bubble shape with the intention to later activate the local cultural life, I decided to divide my time in three ways: Every day I did a performative act by being present in the neighbourhood; deliberately 'hanging out' for two to three hours. I aimed towards allowing unintentional co-incidences to happen and to purely be present and observe. I ended up sitting on the same bench in week one. From week two, as the weather did not allow for sitting outdoor too much, I moved between places in the neighbourhood, sitting in the library, at the bus stop or in one of the two local bars. While sitting, I started to make drawings about the neighbours movements to find out which public areas are mostly used.

I started another layer of engagement by meeting people intentionally, at their homes, offices, workplaces and in bars. I further conducted a Saturday morning activity, "Route 66", where we asked locals to draw their daily routes onto a map. Another level of getting into the context was a series of planned and spontaneous encounters of the neighbourhood and the areas around, which happened through walks, through attending cultural events, doing home visits or going for dinner.

The second level of observation was being present in the workshops of the initiators, hanging out in their office at Jazar², going out for lunch together and being hands-on in the lead up to the final object.

Third: As classical phenomenology clearly points out, what and how one observes, converses and settles in has all but to do with who you are: age, gender, nationality, language and own life experiences. Inviting me as a female German with a certain age, appearance and a biographical moment in Spain in a working class neighbourhood of Madrid in my early twenties made all the difference to the nature of contact making and observation. This essay reflects on my subjective interpretation of the context through my lived experiences.³ One obvious reason for inviting me was our joint involvement in Huarte in 2017.⁴

¹ <http://www.hablarenarte.com/> [online 28th January 2019], a cultural platform from Madrid, was invited to advise the project and to connect it with the professional field outside of Pamplona.

² <https://jazar.org/> [online 28th January 2019] Jazar is a collective space of creation, a community project by 60 initiatives open to anyone with a desire to create, to learn and to exchange knowledge.

³ Woodruff Smith, David, Phenomenology, first published Nov 16, 2003; substantive revision 2013.

<http://scalar.usc.edu/works/bodies/david-woodruff-smith-phenomenology-2016> [online 28th January 2019]

⁴ Rethinking the Container, as part of CAPP where I took up the role of being the artist researcher.

I The location: Grupo Urdánóz in Etxabakoitz

Etxabakoitz and within this location a dense formation of high rises, called Grupo Urdánóz, is the geographic centre of this architectural, interventionist, public work. Together with the mayor of Pamplona, mayor of the city council of Etxabakoitz, Angel Urdanoz, they decided in 1958 to build in this industrialised area a housing complex for the workers of the nearby factories. 4000 of them had come from other parts of Spain to work in the factories, back then outside the limits of Pamplona. Initially, this group of 20 H-shaped blocks made out of poor materials and provided with few infrastructure, looked more alike a contemporary village centred next to the income providers. As such, Grupo Urdánóz/ Etxabakoitz gained its social and geographical reputation of being a peripheral place to the nearby city of Pamplona.

At first sight, the entire city outside the ancient, hill-based city centre seemed to me visually like typical Spanish peripheral architectures of high-rises from the 1950th onwards, with shops on the ground floors and plazas inbetween. The majority of citizens of Pamplona live in fairly new high-rise apartments as the medieval city has only been growing outside its walled centre since the 1920th. A peripheral place is always defined in relation to a centre. In terms of the human body, for example, legs and arms, especially hands and feet would be the most peripheral to the main torso. **Grupo Urdánóz was once centred close to the factories nearby.** Once these shut in the 1980th and the city grew closer, **the geographic centeredness of this neighbourhood changed massively.**

Today Grupo Urdánóz lives through an almost ridiculous moment in time: Located next to the only remaining company, an international chemical industry⁵, next to a highway and train tracks, on the bottom of a newly built neighbourhood of Barañáin to which it is connected with an elevator, Grupo Urdánóz presents itself as a cul-de-sac neighbourhood, behind the fields with garden allotments, the river Elortz and hillside, an empty field in front. It is waiting since 20 years for an urban re-planning process. Since the economic crisis hit Spain in 2008, the situation is stuck: the agreed plans of re-urbanisation had to be abandoned, new plans are slow and faced with difficulties as almost all of the wasteland around had been bought by international investors demanding a massive (also economic) force by the Pamplonian municipality to come to new agreements.

Meanwhile, the situation for the approximately remaining 1600 inhabitants of Grupo Urdánóz is one in constant limbo. Infrastructures like in other neighbourhoods, e.g. transportation, parking, green markets, cultural⁶ and shopping centres, are not being built, buildings and streets not being renovated or expanded to contemporary necessities, and private as well as public investments are hesitant. Surrounded by abandoned company buildings, by ruins of a former monastery and church, by wasteland, but also by green space, **Grupo Urdánóz also provides creative, un-designed free space.** The neighbourhood has a continuous bad reputation as working class neighbourhood with a high representation of the gipsy community as well as a more or less transient migrant population from 65 nations⁷.

II Getting to know Grupo Urdánóz: Unintentional knowledge gain

Unintentional knowledge gain can be described as a specific sense of observant attitude to the every day. In Grupo Urdánóz, sitting in public space was initially difficult. I realized quickly, **not only the buildings stand close to each other and create narrow street canyons, but also the people live in close proximity to each other.** The public space is all but anonymous. Everyone passing by realized quickly, that this person sitting here was new and foreign to the place. Public space in Grupo Urdánóz seemed to me more male than female with all its benches and the football ground. Women tend to walk fast and with intention or appear in groups while many men seem to have enough time to allow

⁵ <https://www.huntsman.com> [online 28th November 2018]

⁶ <http://www.pamplonaescultura.es/> [online 28th November 2018] The function of civioxes are public centres who provide cultural offers in the largest sense as well as social services to their neighbourhoods.

⁷ <https://www.noticiasdenavarra.com/2017/01/26/vecinos/pamplona/etxabakoitz-el-barrio-que-se-ve-abandonado-y-con-un-futuro-incierto#Loleido> [online 28th January 2019]

themselves to be flamboyant in slow pace. I started my sitting and drawing; and quickly made friends with the ones hanging out like myself: Jesus Angel, a Gypsy in his 50th, as well as a Romanian man which was not able to speak due to his stroke. We spend time together sitting in the sun and Jesus as my entry point would tell me about everyone passing by: their family stories, drama, dilemma and who was part of his family.

Other formats of unintentional knowledge gain assembled around having coffees in various local bars and the bakery. I mostly hung out in the “Bar Chino”, manned by a Chinese family, like in so many places in Spain, where this typical, time-consuming family business is handed over.

Having certain culturally mainstreamed ideas and also being influenced by popular media, I made assumptions about peoples financial, social and legal conditions which turned out to be pure fiction-of-my-head and not applicable for Grupo Urdánoz.

By visiting other working class neighbourhoods around, I gained a sense of the characteristics of Grupo Urdánoz. I attended a theatre play in nearby Zizur, participated in a Jane’s Walk in San Jorge⁹, I visited Huarte and Burlada. I went home by bike or bus to La Txantrea where I stayed. Once in a while I ended up in the old city centre of Pamplona with its small streets, the many bars and restaurants and its public buildings of gothic and medieval origin. Most visits were arranged by Itxaso, Salomé and Xabi in order to give me a local feeling of periphery.

II – 1 Getting to know Grupo Urdánoz: Intentional knowledge gain

Parallel, I had a number of deliberate conversations with people either living in or taking up a professional role in Grupo Urdánoz. They corrected my assumptions through their first person testimonies. The frozen urban planning situation due to political and financial changes is the biggest challenge of the area. Jon, the community policeman¹⁰, describes his neighbourhood involvement as mediator between the municipal bureaucracy and active neighbourhood associations. Currently they are turning the only plot still owned by the municipality into 50 garden allotments. Similar to Jon, the youth- and social worker Iñigo from Etxabakoitz Bizirik¹¹ describes the atmosphere as very convivial and pro-active. He emphasises that people have been migrants from the beginning, first as factory workers from Andalucía, Galicia and Extremadura, now as second generation migrants from many nations to eventually settle somewhere in Spain. Idoia Zaldizuri, a graphic designer, visual artist and active member of Jazar, describes with her insight view as inhabitant of Grupo Urdánoz the atmosphere in terms of the culture and lived attitude as very ‘castellano’, meaning more national/international than local and Basque.

Inhabitants identify with the place. I could witness that in some of the events. People attended who grew up in Grupo Urdánoz but no longer live here. Remarkable is the present attitude of self-activation and self-education, the support and collaborative minds of individuals and associations and the historical self-conception of self-help and therefore self-responsibility.

II – 2 How participants learn

⁸ Jesus Angel is the son of a fabric worker and later woodworker based in Spain, but he feels part of an European Diaspora due to his gipsy roots.

⁹ <https://janeswalk.org/> [online 28th November 2018]

¹⁰ Policía comunitaria, a model programme of Pamplona in three diverse neighbourhoods

<http://www.pamplona.es/verPagina.asp?idPag=219216EN>. [online 28th November 2018]. The model programme Policía comunitaria is running from February 2017-February 2018 in three neighbourhoods in Pamplona. This person serves as mediator between the neighbours and the municipality. The aim is to make self-initiated action and activities easier in terms of permissions. In total, five ordinary police men have been invited to take up the role. Now they receive training, e.g. in mediation.

¹¹ <https://www.facebook.com/etxabakoitz/> and <http://etxabakoitz.info> [online 28th January 2019] Etxabakoitz Bizirik is a local and very active neighbourhood association.

This type of participatory artistic work lives of several factors: Someone initiates an action with a specific intention, a participating group responds to the invitation over a period of time in which something is actually being performed and therefore created together. All of the above demand presence.

Neurobiologist Francisco Varela and change-manager Otto Scharmer both research on the awareness of transformative experiences:¹² When having a “real person” experience, one is able to withdraw from assumptions and face blind spots. The presence of the other, a real person in a real context, is needed to arrive at new knowledge through a constant cycle of suspension, re-direction and letting-go of habitual thinking and action. **My presence offered to the neighbours and the project initiators a counterpart to verbalize first hand experience, but also ones understanding of structures and systems as well as the always arising question of eternity in a constant process of becoming and passing by.** In return, the presence of neighbours as well as my hosts allowed me to get aware of what and how I decode situational meaning.

III The creation process: Planning and letting go

Pre-planning is necessary to budget time, resources and to get a conscious idea of what is the intention of such creative action. As such, the initiators worked out, based on their previous work experience and work relationships, a complex plan for 2018 / 2019 with a series of interventions, conferences, publications as well as video documentation to explore the nature of peripheries in and around Pamplona.

The initial idea of building a large mobile space to be used for cultural activities by the Grupo Urdánóz neighbours arose as an expressed need by the very same in a festival in 2017¹³. A dialogue between the Repensar la Periferia team and the social workers of the festival organisation Etxabakoitz Bizirik began.

In this first phase to fulfil a neighbourhood need, the initiators allowed the reality of practice to amend the plans according to necessities and new insights. Various elements changed. For one, the initiators had intended to already know Etxabakoitz better by the time of my arrival and the beginning of the building workshops. Due to professional and resource based realities, this contact making had not happened in the intended intensity.

As architects, they master a planning and building process of objects. With regards to that, they quickly realized, that similar to the Totem building process in Huarte¹⁴, the building of a mobile inflatable object is something familiar to their professional reality. The activation of such an object is a less known and unfamiliar process. This resulted in three mayor changes of plans:

1. Building a gigantic inflatable is a very tedious process lasting several days and it is not an ideal process to involve children and adults in. Therefore, the architects realized the construction themselves. Also, the bad weather did not allow to build visibly in public space and to involve participants for easier tasks.
2. Local involvement becomes fundamental in phase 2, the activation process of this object. For that, one needs to build relationships first. This demands presence in space. The consequence of this realisation is to start engaging with a group of young people over the next couple of months. The idea is to build up relationships and to give a sense of what such mobile, inflatable space can hold for them.

¹² Three Gestures of Becoming Aware, Claus Otto Scharmer in conversation with Francisco Varela, January 12, 2000, Paris, <http://bit.ly/2xSC1YC> [online 10th January 2019]

¹³ The music festival Ibaertxean took place on the free space of the Ekiparkea in 2017. Ana Enguita, was the architect in charge of the urban design of the festival Ibaertxean. <https://www.facebook.com/etxabakoitz/> [online 28th November 2018]

¹⁴ <http://www.hablarenarte.com/capp/category/residencias/residencia-centro-huarte/> [online 28th November 2018]

3. In spring 2019, instead of moving to another periphery, to stay and invest in Grupo Urdánoz for a series of cultural activities in the inflatable space, meaning to make sure this object is known and familiar and can be handed over to the neighbourhood for their own activation.

To summarize, the team decided to invest in deeper relationships and longer processes in this one site. The geographical closeness of the teams' office¹⁵ at Jazar offers the opportunity for an easier and sustainable engagement to deepen the connections.

III-1 Knowledge gain in moments of gatherings

Five public gatherings unveiled the dynamics of place and of the team. My visit started with a joint walk through the area in a group of seven, allowing for different levels of exploration. Through this group activity, we quickly achieved a playful way to spontaneously introduce ourselves to people and projects along the way, but we also engaged in conversations with each other. Having the opportunity to follow Itxaso, Salomé and Xabi over a period of time, it becomes obvious, that they are not only professionals in terms of constructing, handling materials and planning a building process, but they are knowledgeable and talented in drafting moments of celebration, joint creative acts and exploration. It is based on people skills, a lived attitude of collaboration, a joy to experiment, trust in team processes and vision. As such, this self-initiated project serves as a springboard for all kind of processes where the journey will dictate situational changes.

The next public invitation was an outdoor activity: The project team introduced themselves to the neighbours offering a print workshop in collaboration with Etxabakoitz Bizirik. The second outdoor activity, the engagement into the construction of such an object, turned out to be attended mainly by children. As the children of Grupo Urdánoz largely spend time unattended in public space, Itxaso, Salomé and Xabi gave a construction workshop to them.

If people feel appreciated, recognized and listened to, they tend to be open, curious and cooperative. The neighbours of Grupo Urdánoz, including the children, felt obviously very invited to join in. Used to an atmosphere of collaborative action, Grupo Urdánoz is an ideal periphery to energize even more.

On Saturday, I conducted in collaboration with the three my "Route 66¹⁶" workshop, touring the neighbourhood with an enlarged map and inviting people to visualize their daily routes. Their engagement allowed for further questions around favourite places and extended movements. The unintentional information level resulted to be very rich.

By the time the "bubble" was build, under the observation of some neighbours, some ideas for activities had naturally arrived and relationships formed. The rainy, cold weather, the time pressure and smallness of the construction site had been a challenge over a couple of days, but the inauguration day turned out to be a sunny Saturday.

The bubble intrigued through its beauty: Shiny plastic surfaces, bright colours of red, black and transparent and the clear shape of an oval majestic dome, standing freely on the football ground. It attracted people from all directions, people who saw the object from afar, people who called their friends to come and join, neighbours who were curious about its beautiful strange appearance. Iosu Zapata¹⁷ and his colleagues played music from the gipsy culture and involved with their laxness the musical neighbours. It was the honour and pride of men, women and children to sing, drum, clap mainly flamenco music while others stayed outside to have a drink or bite to eat. This day marked the end of phase 1, a repacking of the object to continue being activated locally in the near future.

¹⁵ Estudio Orekari is based in Jazar: <https://www.facebook.com/orekariestudio/> [online 28th November 2018]

¹⁶ U.S. Route 66 (US 66 or Route 66), also known as the Will Rogers Highway, the Main Street of America or the Mother Road, was one of the original highways in the U.S. Highway System. US 66 served as a primary route for those who migrated west, especially during the Dust Bowl of the 1930s, and the road supported the economies of the communities through which it passed. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/U.S._Route_66 [online 28th November 2018]

¹⁷ Iosu Zapata as locally invited artist and performer decided to propose a musical activity around flamenco after having exchanged and interact with the people from the neighbourhood.

III-2 Prototyping

The field of 'art in the public interest' has been growing over the years in projects, approaches, methods and intentions. Art historian Miwon Kwon named some of the „shifts in advanced art practices over the past thirty years: the slide of emphasis from aesthetic concerns to social issues, from the conception of an art work primarily as an object to ephemeral processes or events, from prevalence of permanent installations to temporary interventions, from the primacy of production as source of meaning to reception as site of interpretation, and from autonomy of authorship to its multiplicitous expansion in participatory collaborations.“¹⁸ Through my long-term observation I believe that trained architects in the field of 'art in the public interest' arrive with a very appropriate toolbox: An understanding of teamwork, a solid research to ground their ideas and an understanding of duration that is neither solid stone nor one-off spectacles, but a stream of continuous flexible prototypes. Different to artists who often define their input as “initiation”, setting a blaze without the intention to perpetuate something, an architectural approach would never reject to establish something if “it works”. What works as prototype for site or context is being tested and amended until gaining satisfaction on an esthetical but also process level.

III Conclusion and learning

Western democratic systems currently face continuously the systemic problems created by endless growth. Neo-liberal ethics tend to utilize artistic processes to de-politize the debate by outsourcing and esthetising problems. The political reality of Grupo Urdániz asks for an integrative, transparent urban planning process, securing peoples homes. It asks for more space for activities of the commons. It asks for further empowerment of the people onsite through joint actions. If 'Repensar la Periferia' aims to serve the development of a periphery, it has to respond to their demands as one agent of (political) change.

One can observe in the professional creative world unanswered contradictions of convivial artistic activities in an efficient neo-liberal environment. These processes like deeply engaging in a neighbourhood and building a perfectly usable space appear playful, skilful and easy, yet take an enormous amount of time, energy and attention of detail; and they cost money.

A parallel example in a peripheric environment is “Parkwerk”¹⁹ in Duisburg-Lohberg, a German post-mining industrial area at the Dutch border. The Dutch-German team of Marcel van der Meijs (landscape architect), Jeanne van Heeswijk (artist) and Britt Juergensen (theatre maker) responded to an art commission. The call asked for artistic proposals to turn the former industrial site into a leisure park. The focus of the team and project was less on the formal esthetisation of the site, but more on a process where they imagined jointly with the locals a complex structural change that included employment questions, a new sense of cultural identity and ownership of the place.

The inflatable space in Etxabakoitz and the water tower in Lohberg play both the role of mental and real meeting point of the commons. The activation and training-up process with working class Lohberg started in 2015 and is still ongoing. After an initially funded period, the art project transformed into a non-profit neighbourhood association that defined its aims as developing cultural and socio-economical services and opportunities in and for the park. Financed through ongoing application processes, the association employs a project manager to orchestrate the activities, the growing network and the future visions onsite. The art project understands itself as 'Gesamtkunstwerk' in shaping local peoples lives, and not only a piece of land.

What rarely gets communicated between the international urban activists is the tension between unpaid, idealistic work for civil society based on modest self-raised budgets versus e.g. commissioned

¹⁸ <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0102/kwon/en> [online 28th November 2018]

¹⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/Parkwerk/> and <http://www.kreativ.quartier-lohberg.de/de/kunst/kuenstler/vanheeswijk.php> [online 30th January 2019]

interventions by municipalities. Generally speaking, levels of engagement are defined by resources, intention and passion. The level of success onsite is connected to the possible intensity and presence of its initiators. This engagement is hardly ever financially compensated and is based on a reputational economy, further on an authentic political attitude versus the estetisation or spectacle of areas in distress. A project like this needs to be vary of and deal with the displacement strategies of tough realities through a cultural de-politisation process.

An artistic representation is needed for the professional career of the team, but in professional contexts, not at Grupo Urdánoz. In Grupo Urdánoz, it needs a hand-on engaged process with people and site that does not distract from the real issues at stake. Legislative political changes would be a proper democratic format to tackle the local challenges. Meanwhile, **projects like 'Repensar la Periferia/Rethinking the Periphery' can use their utopian potential to offer and demonstrate convivial, smart and useful models and strategies of local change. It also served to make peripheric situations widely visible.**